

‘Reason’s Feminist Disciples’ - Cartesianism and seventeenth-century English women

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Introduction

Descartes and feminist theory

Trying to account for Descartes' continued appeal to English thinkers and for their selective perception of the assets and shortcomings of his philosophy, the historian of ideas, Russell Anderson, claims that

Descartes was a sort of intellectual restaurant where English thinkers found a variety of choice dishes, selecting for continuous diet only those which were peculiarly attractive to them and oftentimes cursing those which were in any sense distasteful, but always returning to appease their appetites.¹

Twentieth-century scholars have thought little about the attractions of Descartes' thinking. Especially in feminist theory, he has a bad press as the 'instigator' of the body-mind-split – seen as one of the theoretical bases for the subordination of women in Western culture.² Even the most cursory look at the reception of Descartes' theories in feminist thought reveals that 'Cartesian' here serves as a chiffre for an epistemological paradigm through which perception was increasingly structured into categories of the knowing subject, characterised through his *Ratio* on the one hand, and the known object, on the other. This separation with its clear hierarchical implications also pervaded the gender order founded upon it. One of the chief criticisms of feminist theory is that the specific realities of women's lives made them less able to develop a Cartesian kind of Reason, seen as "a highly abstract mode of thought, separable, in principle, from the emotional complexities and

¹ Russell Anderson (1937), "Descartes Influence in seventeenth-century England", in: *Travaux du IXe Congrès International de Philosophie, Études Cartésiennes*, p. 114.

² Genevieve Lloyd examines why Descartes' reason is perceived as working against women. She notes that although Descartes had intended otherwise his philosophy had a negative effect for women in Western Europe. See Genevieve Lloyd (1999), "Reason as Attainment", in: Susan Bordo (1999) *Feminist Interpretations of René Descartes*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press. See further Susan Bordo (1986), „The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought“, in: *Signs*, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 439-456, and Susan Bordo (1985), *The Flight to Objectivity. Essays on Cartesianism & Culture*. New York: State University New York. And Genevieve Lloyd (1984), *The Man of Reason. 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy*, London: Routledge.

practical demands of ordinary life.”³ Genevieve Lloyd explains further that “the sharpness of his [Descartes’] separation of the ultimate requirements of truth-seeking from the practical affairs of everyday life reinforced already existing distinctions between male and female roles, opening the way to the idea of distinctive male and female consciousness.”⁴ In this perspective only the Cartesian ‘man of reason’ was able to be guided by pure reason and to transcend his worldly dependencies in order to gain ‘true’ knowledge of things. Rational thought and science are therefore marked as masculine.

Seen from within seventeenth-century discourse, the appeal of Descartes’ way of conceptualising nature or the mind becomes more clear. The dictum that can be inferred from his writings that ‘the mind has no sex’, can be seen as an appeal to think about rational capacities in the utopian perspective of a gender neutral discourse. Ina Schabert, Ruth Perry, Hilda L. Smith, and others acknowledge such a development for England⁵ in claiming that Cartesian ideas had a profound impact on seventeenth-century women.⁶ Schabert for instance calls the outcome of this influence “Cartesian Feminism” and traces examples for this kind of thinking in contemporary literature. Hilda Smith wants “to identify and analyze feminist views produced in seventeenth-century England and to link them to a central theme of later feminist movements”. For her, Descartes and “the development of rationalism as a complement to the use of faith in discovering truth provided the feminists with a significant method to analyze the relationships between the sexes.” All show that rational theories, in particular the ideas of René Descartes, influenced women to become involved intellectually and even publish their thinking. Perry demonstrates that some women took up epistolary exchanges with scholars and understands those exchanges as a distinct genre of the seventeenth century.

³ Genevieve Lloyd (1999), “Reason as Attainment”, p. 79.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Erica Harth does so for France. See Erica Harth (1992), *Cartesian Women. Versions and Subversions of Rational Discourse in the Old Regime*. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press.

⁶ Ina Schabert (1997), *Englische Literaturgeschichte aus der Sicht der Geschlechterforschung*, Stuttgart: Kröner; Ruth Perry (1985), “Radical doubt and the Liberation of Women”, in: *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 18, pp. 472-493 and Ruth Perry (1999), “Radical doubt and the Liberation of Women”, in: Bordo, Susan (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of René Descartes*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University, pp. 169-189; Hilda L. Smith (1982), *Reason's Disciples. Seventeenth century English feminists*. Urbana & London: University of Illinois Press.

So why write another book on Descartes' appeal for seventeenth-century women, women who have been called, with a certain anachronistic appropriation of twentieth-century terminology, "first feminists"⁷? Can Cartesianism be read with an eye to strategies of empowerment for women? And if so what about the tension between the outlined two positions – feminist theory and feminist Cartesianism? Margaret Atherton is one of the few scholars who addresses these issues by asking: "How can Descartes' concept of reason be seen both as having deprived women of a mind of their own and as having encouraged them to take control of their own minds?"⁸ Atherton's answer is that Cartesianism "wears a different face" in each of these perspectives and that the gendered concepts of reason discussed by feminist theory are not the same as the gender-neutral concept used by or for women of the time. My work analyses the "face" of Cartesianism as it was adapted in favour of English seventeenth-century women as such a work does yet not exist.

My dissertation examines how specific tenets of Descartes' philosophy were employed on behalf of English women in the second half of the seventeenth century in England. Two points are especially important here, because they allowed this new conception to prosper: firstly, the fact that the confusion and unsettledness of the time regarding the concept of 'woman' allowed old limitations to be challenged in the first place; and secondly, the fact that the extracts taken from Descartes' philosophy went far beyond the issue of pure reason, the turning point of criticisms by feminist theory.

An examination of the overlap of two different ways of understanding the difference between men and women will help illuminate my first point. In the one-sex model, which had long been in place, woman was understood as a lesser version of man. In the two-sex model, women were identified by their complete difference from men.⁹ Both models coexisted for some time before the latter became the hegemonic model. For a short period during their coexistence, then, such ambivalence left room

⁷ Moira Ferguson (1985), *First Feminists. British Women Writers 1578-1799*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

⁸ Atherton, Margaret (1993), "Cartesian Reason and Gendered Reason", in: M. Louise Antony / Charlotte Witt (eds.): *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*. San Francisco & Oxford: Westview Press, pp. 19-35.

⁹ See Thomas Laqueur (1990), *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

to think, propose and practise new concepts of gender identity for women. My second point, that the material taken from Descartes' philosophy and employed on behalf of English women concentrates on aspects of his philosophy which go beyond the implications of the body-mind-split alone, has as yet been absent from the perspective of feminist theory which concentrates on the concept of Cartesian reason and the limitations it ascribes to women through to the current day.

My dissertation identifies three key aspects of women's appropriation of Cartesianism which were extracted and frequently employed for the English women's struggle for the recognition of their rational equality: Descartes' postulate of equal rationality, his rejection of the Aristotelian curriculum and his strategy of universal doubt. These principles offered viable intellectual tools with which women called into question and challenged male-dominated culture. My focus is on Descartes as a thinker, who – whatever his real or imagined intention might have been – provided women in seventeenth-century England with tools with which to change their status, in other words: with instruments of empowerment.

Literacy and female education

Any look into the intellectual activity of women in history must start with an investigation into the respective notions of female education and literacy. To what extent were women of the time at all capable of reading? In this period, without general schooling, education was the privilege of upper- and, to a growing extent, middle-class women. David Cressy has shown a significant rate of general literacy in seventeenth-century England. He based his numbers on a person's ability to sign his or her name and argues that in the 1640s 30% of the male and 10% of the female population in England were able to read and write.¹⁰ By the beginning of the eighteenth century, he estimates, the percentage of literate women was 30% (men 45%). Literacy was more common in London than in rural areas. Cressy found that 22% of women in London signed their name in the 1670s. In the 1680s the

¹⁰ See David Cressy (1980), *Literacy and the Social Order. Reading and writing in Tudor and Stuart England*, Cambridge & London: Cambridge University Press, p. 147.

respective figure was already 36% and by the 1690s the number had further increased to some 48%. Margaret Spufford's argument that reading was always learnt before writing makes these numbers even more impressive,¹¹ suggesting, in fact, that the percentage of seventeenth-century English women who were able to read was higher still.

Books, periodicals, tracts and pamphlets were widely available and affordable as a result of mass production made possible by the printing press. Seventeenth-century England saw "the full significance of print as a medium of mass communication."¹² The number of printed books more than doubled between 1640 and 1710.¹³ By the 1660s as many as 400,000 almanacs were printed annually with the implication that "one family in three could be buying a new almanac yearly."¹⁴ With the growing number of copies, prices fell, multiplying the number of those purchasing and owning books. This growing access to books meant that women were reading, even if many books were not specifically intended for them.

Printed media increased not only in number but in variety as well. From the 1650s on newspapers appeared regularly and by the end of the seventeenth century periodicals were introduced. They were issued once or even twice a month, allowing quick responses on the latest information on all kind of topics. These publications sought to educate their readership and, in many cases, explicitly addressed female readers. Philosophy, in general, and Descartes' philosophy, in particular, was discussed and made available to literate persons of both sexes (see Chapter 1 on

¹¹ Margaret Spufford (1981), *Small Books and Pleasant Histories. Popular Fiction and its Readership in Seventeenth Century England*, Cambridge & London & New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 19.

¹² John Feather (1993), *The Seventeenth-Century Book Trade*, Loughborough: Loughborough University, p. 17.

¹³ "The pace of publication significantly increased. The annual output of new books more than doubled between 1601 and 1700, reaching a peak of perhaps almost 2000 titles in 1680. ... What is certain, is that the number of books in circulation very significantly increased between the beginning and the end of the century, as did the number of titles." In: John Feather (1993), *The Seventeenth-Century Book Trade*, p. 14. What needs to be also taken into consideration in my opinion is the fact that the church courts collapsed in 1640 and censorship which had been in the hands of the clergy vanished. Many groups and individuals found a public voice.

¹⁴ Margaret Spufford (1981), *Small Books and Pleasant Histories*. p. 2.

the dissemination of Cartesianism in seventeenth-century England and the appendix on Periodicals).

These literacy figures support the argument for female participation in contemporary debates on the nature of the sexes. England was strongly influenced by and played a major role in the *querelle des femmes* – the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century controversy over the worth of women – known in England as “the pamphlet wars”.¹⁵ Women as social and rational beings became a distinct, legitimate subject of public discussion. These debates often took the form of disputations, juxtaposing the advantages and disadvantages of women and were also the subject of literary and theatrical texts representing the intellectual achievements of a few, mostly aristocratic, women.¹⁶ Whereas only men had raised their voices in the sixteenth century debate, by the turn of the seventeenth century women started to argue on behalf of their own sex. Jane Anger was the first woman to respond to attacks on women although under a pseudonym with her *Protection for Women* (1598), many others followed.¹⁷ A more general debate on women emerged in the 1640s though the quality and emphasis of this discussion had now shifted. Though still focusing on the nature of women, they were far more than a rhetorical exercise: they offered new visions of society which, so their hope, would be adapted by an active readership and effectively change the status of women.

¹⁵ See Katherine Usher Henderson / Barbara F. McManus (1985), *Half Humankind. Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540-1640*, Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, p. 11.

¹⁶ See Linda Woodbridge (1984), *Women and the English Renaissance*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, p. 13, and Francis Utleby (1994), *The Crooked Rib*, New York; and Diana Purkiss (1992), “Material Girls: The Seventeenth-Century Women debate,” in: Clare Brant / Diana Purkiss (eds.) (1992), *Women, Texts & Histories 1675-1760*, pp. 69-101.

¹⁷ Linda Woodbridge (1984), *Women and the English Renaissance*.

The historical and philosophical situation: England in the second half of the seventeenth century

The pamphlet wars themselves were made possible by the social and political situation in mid-seventeenth-century England. The second half of the seventeenth century, characterized by the Civil War, the beheading of Charles I in 1649, and the Restoration of the Stuarts, was a period of political confusion and change in England, but also a hotbed of intellectual and spiritual experimentation in which many old limitations were challenged. With the beheading of Charles I in 1649 and various subsequent attempts to establish new governments, instability and challenge to old limitations were ever present. The seething religious background added to this development. Many radical religious sects authorised the individual's direct access to 'God'. This allowed women to air their grievances in a more tolerant climate and made audible more radical pro-women voices. As a result, women appeared for the first time in significant number as contributors to public discussions of religious and social matters.¹⁸ As the attack and defence strategy of the pamphlet wars cooled down in the 1640s, the subsequent decade experienced "the first great outpouring of women's published writings in England: some 130 texts, written by more than 70 women appeared."¹⁹ While the specific fortunes of those women enmeshed within radical religious sects is beyond the scope of this introduction, it is nevertheless useful to point to these developments as indicative of the mental landscape prevalent during this period. Generally, the seventeenth century saw an overall increase in the

¹⁸ "More than one half of the extant writings of the decade, for instance – some 70 texts – are politico-religious tracts which address the key social concerns of the Interregnum. The great majority of these were written by members of the Society of Friends (Quakers)." In: Elaine Hobby (1994), "'Discourse so unsavoury' Women's published writings of the 1650s", in: Isobel Grundy / Susan Wiseman (eds.), *Women, Writing, History 1640-1740*, Athens: The University of Georgia Press, p. 16-32, p. 21. See also Keith Thomas (1958), "Women and the Civil War sects", in: *Past and Present*, no. 13, pp. 42-62; Rachel Trubowitz (1992), "*Female Preachers and Male Wives: Gender and Authority in Civil war England*", in: James Holstun (1992), *Pamphlet Wars: Prose in the English Revolution*, London: Frank Cass Publishers, pp. 112-133. Stevie Davies (1998), *Unbridled spirits: Women of the English Revolution, 1640-1660*. London: Women's Press.

¹⁹ Elaine Hobby (1992), "'Discourse so unsavoury'", p. 16. See also Patricia Crawford who understands the 1640s as a more significant watershed for the explosion of female publication. Patricia Crawford (1985), "Women's Published Writings 1600-1700", in: *Women in English Society 1500-1800*, London & New York: Methuen, pp. 211-282.

number of women publishing in England,²⁰ though only a proportion of those works actually dealt with the controversy on women.

Why England? Whereas Descartes' writings had been banned by the Catholic church throughout continental Europe in 1663 through the 'Index Romanus', they had been published and discussed in England without interruption or need for dissimulation. Descartes' scientific achievements were highly valued in England, especially by the Royal Society which earned a reputation as the forerunner of scientific discovery in Europe at the time. On the other hand, for those fearing that God's existence was threatened by a mechanistic interpretation of the world, Descartes' philosophy offered a viable alternative, since it attempted to prove divine existence with the help of a scientific method.

Descartes' thought was at a fairly early stage known to most English intellectuals as French developments in natural philosophy were followed closely. In the beginning, his ideas were discussed exclusively in academic circles. Thomas Hobbes, Charles Cavendish and his brother William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle were among those English men who discussed philosophical matters with Descartes directly. Henry More, one of the key Cambridge Platonists, taught the French philosophers' ideas. Publications of varying rigour and quality were produced later, which thus satisfied a broader interest group, eventually leading to the popularisations of Descartes' ideas.

²⁰ See Patricia Crawford (1985), "Women's Published Writings 1600-1700".

Female Cartesians in England

To the current day and despite a number of works dealing with Descartes' reception in this period, there is little academic research into the reception of Descartes' thinking by women in the seventeenth-century. In fact, after reviewing the literature available, one gets the feeling that women were completely absent from this reception.²¹ This is all the more surprising since in France, at the same time, female disciples of Descartes' existed, called "Cartésiennes", a term which suggests an intellectually distinct, numerically significant group.²² Is it plausible that French women discussed Descartes' ideas openly and publicly in their salons²³ while their English contemporaries remained unaffected? Although "Descartes deeply influenced every English thinker of consequence (and many of less importance) between 1640 and 1700"²⁴, apparently, no self-styled disciples of Descartes existed in England. The English way of dealing with Descartes' philosophy was rather that of a discreet inspiration. This appears to have been a phenomenon specific to England, as there is an interesting parallel between English male and female adaptations of Cartesianism: Descartes' ideas were appropriated and embedded in their own corpus of ideas often without even marking their origin.

²¹ Marjorie Hope Nicolson briefly mentions the existence of English women who had an interest in Descartes' ideas while she explores how Cartesianism was received in seventeenth-century England. See Marjorie Hope Nicolson (1929), "The Early Stages of Cartesianism in England", in: *Studies in Philology*, vol. 26, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, pp. 356-374.

²² On Cartésiennes in France see Erica Harth (1992), *Cartesian Women*. Harth does not look into the different trajectories of argument Descartes' ideas offered to be adapted on behalf of women. She explains instead that her work "is not an introduction to all the women who displayed an interest in Descartes ... but is rather an exploration of a discursive relation." In her understanding in order to be a Cartésienne, "women had to speak in the universal (masculine) idiom." p. 5.

²² Ibid., p. 6.

²³ Erica Harth on the popularity of Cartesianism among French women: "Contemporary accounts give the impression that from the 1660s the salons were beset by a craze for Cartesian philosophy", p. 64. See Erica Harth (1992), *Cartesian Women*. In chapter: "The Cartésiennes", pp. 64. Harth further names the salons in which Descartes' ideas were supposedly discussed: Madame de la Sablière, Madame Deshoulières, Mesdames des Bonevaus, D'Outresale, d'Hommeccour, and de Guedreville.

²⁴ Sterling P. Lamprecht (1935), "The Role of Descartes in Seventeenth-Century England", p. 182.

Before turning to a discussion of how Descartes' ideas were adapted and used by and for English women during the Commonwealth and Restoration era, questions of availability, the editions of translations of Descartes must be discussed. Also questions of permission: Were there social or religious barriers (censorship, publishing ban) to reading Descartes and referring to him in intellectual debate? How receptive was society at the time to new and radical ideas?

So why were Descartes' arguments so attractive for women? Descartes had argued for equal rational abilities among individuals in a gender neutral way. He had further critiqued generally accepted truth with his universal doubt. I believe this specific combination of ideas, affirming their rational capabilities, was seen by a number of women as an invitation to become involved in spheres of activity from which they were previously excluded. Moreover, a specific set of Descartes' arguments provided a number of English women with a strategy to extend female agency. Not only did Descartes' views legitimate female rationality, they also allowed an acknowledgement that this female intellect was equally connected to "truth" as that of their male contemporaries. As a consequence, women developed an increased self-esteem and inspiration to pursue their own independent study (and in some cases publishing). These ideas eventually helped to bring forward a demand for female education, as girls and women were still excluded from formal education in seventeenth-century England.

One of Descartes' prominent disciples was Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle. She was one of the earliest English female authors to adapt Descartes' thinking. The inspiration of Descartes empowered her to speak up and demand the acknowledgement of female rationality. His theories impelled her to write and publish her own work. It had been difficult for her to deal with philosophy and academic subjects, as her education had been deficient – like that of many of her female contemporaries. As a consequence she demanded formal education for girls and women. Furthermore she developed a concept of learning structured around the notion of rational woman – a theme woven into her plays and awaiting imitation by her audience.

Mary Astell was another well-known female author who, bolstered by the ideas of Cartesianism, publicly claimed that women – because rational – needed to be included in formal education. She pursued a project which not only offered a theoretical outline on why women were as rationally capable as men but intended to set up a female institution for learning. Astell was an acknowledged female intellectual who had demonstrated with her published writings that the mind had indeed no sex. She had a great interest in her female contemporaries and believed that with her sympathy and guidance they would acknowledge their own rationality and use it for their own and society's benefit.

Sources, structural outline and central theses

My dissertation examines the works of and about Descartes, published between 1640 and 1710 in England. I have used only published material written in English. Since the main focus of my work is on the availability, circulation and dissemination of Cartesian thought among English women, I have looked at all English translations of Descartes' works in the seventeenth century. I further examined texts providing commentaries and reactions on Cartesianism published in the English language. These fall into three categories: Firstly, I have concentrated on publications employing Cartesian discourse, which were intended for or otherwise directly relevant to women. Secondly, I have looked into texts written for a broader and socially diverse readership which employ Cartesian discourses, since they provide an important context for dealing with the repercussions of Descartes' ideas on English women. Thirdly, I have studied periodicals and examined how Cartesian discourses surface here (see appendix). I have left out – for reasons of time and availability – private correspondences and unpublished texts with Cartesian contents. Though these certainly present an untapped resource and might offer an even deeper understanding of women's empowerment through the tools of Cartesian thought, they must be left to some future project.

My general thesis is that Cartesianism, as one of the earliest universalist theories on the nature of human reason, introduced new possibilities into the English debate over the nature and, hence, social position of women. It brought a radical twist to the already existing discussion on women by offering new critical tools which were taken up to argue on behalf of English women. I examine the specific historical conditions of the reception of Descartes' thought in England, the philosophical appeal of his ideas for women and analyse the writings of two English 'disciples' of Descartes.

To begin, in chapter 1, I will discuss questions of reception: how widely was Descartes' philosophy disseminated and made available in seventeenth-century England; how broadly, by what variety of authors, and for which fields of interest were his method and his intellectual authority employed? How readily available were his ideas to contemporary English women? Descartes had produced his ideas with the intention of changing natural philosophy. But they were also adapted with a social objective on behalf of women. In chapter 2, I will deal with the question how this was possible and why Descartes' philosophy was attractive for such an appropriation, and exactly which tenets of his philosophy were attractive and put to use for English women?

Chapters 3 and 4 examine the writings of two eminent female Cartesians. I have chosen two rather prominent English female thinkers to make the repercussions of Cartesianism on English women visible through the example of their published writing. Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle and Mary Astell both employed Descartes' ideas as an empowerment strategy. They demonstrated their experiences in their works with the intention to instruct and support other women to make equal use of this kind of empowerment. Cavendish and Astell are prominent examples of how Descartes' philosophy was adapted for English women. It is a reasonable assumption, based on the evidence made available here, to believe that there were more English women who used Cartesianism as a source of empowerment just as the women examined here, though through the gender-biased selectivity of historical memory, their specific voices did not become part of the historical record.

I believe that the repercussions of Descartes' ideas in relation to English women must be understood in the context of the contemporary development in England with all its confusion, new orientations and the discussion on women which had already been started when Descartes' ideas were appropriated by English women. It is my contention that due to the influence of Cartesianism, the English seventeenth-century debate concerning the nature and social position of women found new impetus and that Cartesian thought helped develop new forms of 'protofeminist' criticism. Cartesianism radically reinvigorated the existing discussion concerning women by offering new argumentative tools. My intention is to demonstrate how those tools worked and how exactly they were taken up to support claims for the extended agency of English women, beginning with arguments in favour of female education. It is this context which inspired Mary Astell to audaciously ask "[f]or since GOD has given Women as well as Men intelligent Souls, why should they be forbidden to improve them?"²⁵

²⁵ Astell, Mary (1694), *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies. For the Advancement of their true and greatest Interest*. London: Wilkin.

1. The dissemination and cultural significance of Cartesianism in seventeenth-century England

In this chapter I will examine the extent to which René Descartes' theories were disseminated and try to assess the cultural significance of this influence in seventeenth-century England. The following analysis places a particular focus on women involved with Cartesianism, although Descartes' female contemporaries were generally excluded from the public sphere in which philosophy was discussed. This chapter examines the specific historical background of the reception of Cartesianism in seventeenth-century England; it endeavours to conceptualise our understanding of female involvement in the light of Descartes' general popularity and the consequent dissemination of his ideas.

Given that women were excluded from the public sphere, it follows that female voices are largely absent from records of public discourses. This fact, however, should not lead to the conclusion that women had no engagement with Cartesianism. An analysis of the involvement of women with Cartesianism must look for major discourses in which, even if not visible to a great extent, women were situated, acknowledging their specific living situations.

It is generally acknowledged today that Descartes enjoyed a considerable influence in seventeenth-century England,¹ and that his theories provoked much

¹ On Cartesianism in England see: Robert Sommer (1887), *Locke's Verhältnis zu Descartes*, Berlin: Mayer & Müller; Marjorie Hope Nicolson (1929), "The Early Stages of Cartesianism in England", in: *Studies in Philology*, vol. 26, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, pp. 356-374; Sterling P. Lamprecht (1935), "The Role of Descartes in Seventeenth-Century England", in: *Studies in the History of Ideas*, vol. III, pp. 181-240; Anderson Russell (1937), "Descartes' Influence in seventeenth century England", *Travaux du IXe Congrès International de Philosophie*, I. part, pp. 113-121; Angus Armitage (1950), "René Descartes (1596-1650) and the early Royal Society", in: *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 1-9; Helen Hervey (1952), "Hobbes and Descartes in the Light of some Unpublished Letters of the Correspondence between Sir Charles Cavendish and Dr. John Pell", in: *Osiris*, vol. 10, pp. 67-90; John Saveson (1959), "Descartes' influence on John Smith, Cambridge Platonist", in: *Journal of the History in Ideas*, vol. XX (April), pp. 255-263; John Saveson (1960), "Differing reactions to Descartes among the Cambridge Platonists", in: *Journal of the History of Ideas*, pp. 560-567; Laurens Laudén (1960), "The Clock Metaphor and Probabilism: The Impact of Descartes on English Methodological Thought, 1650-65", in: *Annals of Science*, vol. 22, pp. 73-105; Alan Gabbey (1982), "Philosophia Cartesiana Triumphata: Henry More (1646-

interest and attained a significant cultural status. According to Russell Anderson "every thinker of note during the period either by acknowledgement or through obvious connection was significantly influenced by Descartes' philosophy. The seventeenth century in England might well be called Cartesian."²

Although certainly all gentlemen of the time were able to read French and Latin, early translations of Descartes' work were undertaken. The first substantial assimilation of his work occurred within the realms of religion and science. Mechanical science had long threatened the Church of England with its anti-animistic perspective, which opposed religion and fanned prevailing anxieties. An understanding of the world merely organised through mechanical principles was deemed heretic since it would have made God superfluous. In that climate, Descartes appeared initially to be a heaven-sent ally, since his philosophy implied a proof of God's existence with the help of a scientific method. In the beginning, then, his ideas were enthusiastically perceived as a controlling and stabilizing tool for the turbulent religious scene in England. The scientific community, the Royal Society in particular, understood Descartes as a herald, lending a legitimising credibility to their dilettante undertakings. His theories, articulating the paradigmatic shift from a

1671)", in: Thomas M. Lennon / John M. Nicholas / John W. Davis, *Problems of Cartesianism*, Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, pp. 171-250; G.A.J. Rogers (1985), "Descartes and the English", in: J.D. North / J.J. Roche (eds.), *The Light of Nature. Essays in the History and Philosophy of Science presented to A.C. Crombie*, Dordrecht & Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, pp. 281-302; Richard Tuck (1988), "Hobbes and Descartes", in: G.A.J. Rogers / Alan Ryan (eds.), *Perspectives on Thomas Hobbes*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 11-42; Arrigo Pacchi (1973), *Cartesio in Inghilterra. Da More a Boyle*. Rome, Bari: Editori Laterza; C. Webster (1969), "Henry More and Descartes: Some new Sources", in: *The British Journal for the History of Science*, vol. IV, December, no. 16, pp. 359-377; Stefan Weyer (1993), *Die Cambridge Platonists*, Frankfurt & Berlin: Peter Lang; Nicholas Tyacke (1997), *The History of the University of Oxford*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, vol. IV; G.A.J. Rogers / J.M.Vienne / Y.C. Zarka (eds.) (1997), *The Cambridge Platonists in Philosophical Context. Politics, Metaphysics and Religion*, Dordrecht & Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers; Verena Olejniczak Lobsien (1999), *Skeptische Phantasien. Eine andere Geschichte der frühneuzeitlichen Literatur*, München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag; Jon Parkin (1999), *Science, Religion and Politics in Restoration England. Richard Cumberland's De Legibus Naturae*, London: The Royal Historical Society / The Boydell Press.

² Russell Anderson (1937), "Descartes' influence in seventeenth century England", in: *Travaux du IXe Congrès International de Philosophie - Études Cartésiennes*, I. part, pp. 113-121, in this case p. 114; see also Sterling Lamprecht (1937), "The Role of Descartes in Seventeenth-Century England", p. 187.

Ptolomaic to a Copernican logic, supplied the long-awaited theoretical basis with which to describe the world from a new perspective. As a consequence, objects were to be measured and understood in mathematical terms, which created 'exact representations' and thus neatly dispensed with meddlesome heresies.

However, Cartesianism did not merely supply a new paradigm to elite thinkers, as represented by the clergy and scientists. The systematic, mathematical theories had a far wider appeal, attracting individuals with the tantalizing prospect of truth and an inferred subsequent stability. Moreover, Descartes' affirmation of the individual was of far greater significance to the subsequent popularity of his theories, in arguing, as he did, for the independent, rational capability of subjects, a notion that facilitated theoretical intellectual independence.

Aristotelianism formed the basis of the established classical curriculum, which Descartes rejected in favour of his idea of the equal rational abilities of all human beings. His idea of cognition stood in striking opposition to a syllogistic logic. A classical education had functioned as a class marker in producing men who had thereby gained an entry to polite society. Girls, however, were generally excluded. Descartes' emphasis on the rational mind thus attracted those individuals formerly excluded from a classical education or who suffered from restrictions. In an age obsessed with the idea of achieving progress through learning, Descartes won many admirers by providing both the opportunity and theoretical framework with which to do so.

But Cartesianism was far from being univocally accepted in England. As Descartes' writings made their appearance in England, their examination, the subsequent critical discussion and the attendant controversy all served to widen his readership. Publications of varying rigour and quality were produced, which satisfied a broader audience, eventually leading to the popularisations of Descartes' ideas. Periodicals of the late 90's of the seventeenth century contain numerous references to Cartesian ideas, indicating the extent to which they had penetrated the middle ranks of society and giving testimony to their availability.

In this examination of the reception of Cartesianism in seventeenth-century England, it is my aim not solely to assess a specific set of ideas in isolation but also to indicate some of the various ways Cartesianism was understood and employed.

1.1. The Introduction of Cartesianism to England

Cartesianism was initially introduced and received in England when it was still in its earliest stage. England was no stranger to developments in French natural philosophy. Since most English gentlemen spoke and read French, publications in the French vernacular did not pose an obstacle to their understanding. Intellectuals of both nationalities were, moreover, connected through academic and religious networks. Father Mersenne, for example, a close intellectual friend of Descartes³ who read and commented on all his drafts, introduced him to Thomas Hobbes. At a fairly early stage, then, Descartes was known to most English intellectuals who had spent time in France (as was the custom for gentlemen and as many had been compelled to do during the time of the Commonwealth). Descartes discussed philosophical matters with Thomas Hobbes and was much admired by Sir Kenelm Digby⁴ and Thomas White, who helped to disseminate Cartesian theories in England.⁵ He was also an intellectual friend of William Cavendish and his brother Charles, a scientific virtuoso, and had almost become a member of the Cavendish household. Only with hesitation did he reject William's invitation to live with the Duke and his wife in England.⁶

³ On the relationship to Mersenne see Adrien Baillet (1693), *The Life of Monsieur Des Cartes, Containing the History of His Philosophy and Works: as also the most remarkable Things that befell him during the whole Course of his Life*. London: Printed by R. Simpson, at the Harp in St. Paul's Church-yard.

⁴ On Sir Kenelm Digby's life see E.W. Bligh (1932), *Sir Kenelm Digby and his Venetia*, London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co.; R.T. Petersson (1956), *Sir Kenelm Digby. The Ornament of England 1603-1665*, London: Jonathan Cape.

⁵ On Descartes' English acquaintances see Sterling Lamprecht (1935), "The Role of Descartes in Seventeenth-Century England", p. 188 and p. 190.

⁶ See Sterling Lamprecht (1935). On William Cavendish's acquaintance with the top minds in Europe such as Descartes, Van Helmont and Thomas Hobbes, see Patricia Phillips (1990), *The Scientific Lady. A Social History of Woman's Scientific Interest 1520-1918*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, pp. 60.

It is therefore no surprise that Cartesian thought was already known in England before Descartes had even published his first work, the *Discourse* in 1637, adding to his well-established reputation. Descartes' works were brought into England through the service of his English acquaintances long before they were published there. Epistolary sources indicate that one of the first shipments of the *Discours de la méthode*,⁷ which had only been published in France a few months earlier, was sent to Thomas Hobbes by Kenelm Digby who was keenly interested in Cartesian thought.⁸ The *Meditationes*, Descartes' second published work, was sent to Hobbes in manuscript form before publication by Mersenne, who was a close friend to both. Hobbes voiced his philosophical disagreement with Descartes, sending him sixteen objections to various points via Mersenne and thus bringing an abrupt end to their intellectual friendship.⁹

Early translations were undertaken to produce English editions of Descartes' work. The *Discours* was translated anonymously into *A Discourse of a Method* and published in 1649 in London. I believe to have found three different versions of the *Discourse*. Of these, two are in the British Library, one belonging to the Thomason Tracts, the other to the Rare Book Collection. The two are identical, differing only in the title pages. The copy held by the Rare Book Collection carries two title pages, which is rather unusual. Those differ from each other in the title itself - one has a hyphen "For the well-guiding of Reason", the other doesn't: "For the well guiding of Reason". It can therefore be suggested that those different title pages, although bound in one edition, initially belonged to two different editions or printings bound together at a later stage. Interestingly enough, this edition also carries an inscription of a name, obviously the owner of the book, which reads: "Elisabeth". All versions

⁷ Descartes' first published work from 1637, Paris.

⁸ Letter from Sir Kenelm Digby to Hobbes under date of 4 October 1637, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson MSS D 1104, f. 12, see Sterling Lamprecht (1935), "The Role of Descartes in Seventeenth-Century England", p. 192.

⁹ See Sterling Lamprecht (1935), pp. 192, and Douglas Bush (1962), *English Literature in the earlier seventeenth Century 1600-1660*, London & Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 365. On Hobbes' worry that Descartes could claim that he had plagiarized his ideas see Richard Tuck (1988), p. 14: "Hobbes was particularly sensitive to the possibility that Descartes might claim that Hobbes had stolen from him his basic ideas about 'the nature and production of light and sound', and of all 'fantasies' or 'ideas'." In: Richard Tuck (1988), "'Hobbes and Descartes'", pp. 11-42, in: G.A.J. Rogers / Alan Ryan (eds.) (1988), *Perspectives on Thomas Hobbes*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

were printed by Thomas Newcombe¹⁰ with various sites of sale. The copy of the Rare Book Collection of the British Library reads, "Printed by Thomas Newcombe, for John Holden at the Anchor in the new Exchange". The third variation, to be found at the Bodleian Library, reads, "Printed by Thomas Newcombe, and are to be sold at his house over against Baynards Castle". These differences indicate that the *Discourse* was reprinted at least twice after its original publication, and throughout the year 1649.

The *Passions of the Soul* followed in 1650,¹¹ the *Compendium of Music* in 1653, and various parts of his discussions of the principles of mechanics in 1661, 1665, and 1697. The *Meditationes* were published in 1664. Henry More, one of the key Cambridge Platonists, translated the third book of the *Principles* in 1650 for his private use, though it is very likely that he used it for his teaching in Cambridge as well. These translations were undertaken despite the country's severe difficulties arising from the civil war. As every English gentleman was certainly able to understand French and Latin, it can be assumed that these translations were produced to satisfy a readership with little or no classical education who lacked the requisite language skills to read the original.¹²

¹⁰ Information on Thomas Necombe: "In the same year [1649], on September 1st, the Council of State ordered his committal to Negate for printing Lilbune's Outcry of the Young Men and Apprentices of London, and he remained a prisoner for three weeks. [Domestic State Papers, 1649-50, vol. ii, Proc. Of the Council of State.] After this he appears to have made his peace with the Government." In: Henry R. Plomer (1907), *A Dictionary of the Booksellers and printers who were at work in England, Scotland and Ireland form 1641 to 1667*, London: Printed for the Bibliographical Society, p. 136.

¹¹ "Descartes himself, on August 14, 1649, sent a copy of his *Passions of the Soul* to the man who translated it into English and who explained that he had for some time eagerly awaited it as a work that people would hasten to read." In: Sterling Lamprecht (1935), "The Role of Descartes in Seventeenth-Century England", p. 192. The introduction to the English version consists of letters from the translator and Descartes answers. Descartes writes in one of those letters of a princess (Elisabeth of Bohemia) who had read and perfectly understood his work, hinting at splendid power of the unspoiled female mind, which was not troubled by the classics.

¹² Descartes originally produced the *Meditationes* in Latin whereas his first published work, the *Discours*, had been written in French to assure the greatest possible readership.

According to Armitage “editions of the correspondence of Descartes, one in French and one in Latin, were available not long after the philosopher’s death, and were reviewed in the *Philosophical Transactions*.”¹³ Peter Borellus translated *The life of Descartes* from the original French into English and published it in 1670; this edition was re-published in 1693 in an enlarged version. Both translations indicate an interest in Descartes’ person,¹⁴ while contemporary sources suggest that a voracious interest in Cartesianism was underway. Robert Hooke recorded in his diary that “on 19 December 1672 he ‘bought in Duck Lane *Descartes Epistles* 6 sh.’; that on 6 July 1674, he acquired ‘*Descartes De Lumine*,’ and how, at Garraway’s Coffee House, in Change Alley, on 27 May 1676, there was ‘much discourse about Descartes doubting.’”¹⁵

Shortly after Descartes’ works arrived in England, numerous publications and commentaries appeared. One of the earliest critiques was offered by John Davies of Kidwelly,¹⁶ entitled: *Reflections upon Monsieur De Cartes discourse of a method for the well-guiding of reason*, published in 1655, questioning Descartes’ notion of individual equal rationality. After 1662, with many aristocrats returning from French exile, considerable knowledge of Cartesianism swept into England, fanning the already existing interest. The Duke of Newcastle and his wife Margaret Cavendish had closely studied Descartes’ philosophy. Margaret Cavendish’s *Philosophical Letters* (1664) are a critique of aspects of his theories. In chapter 4 I will demonstrate in more detail the ways in which Descartes’ theories influenced Margaret Cavendish. His work helped her to develop a rational self-assurance which she defined as a strategy to follow her own example intended for her female contemporaries.

¹³ Angus Armitage (1950), "René Descartes (1596-1650) and the early Royal Society", in: *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 1-9, in this case p. 15. See also *Philosophical Transactions* (1667), vol. I, p. 392 and (1668), vol. III, p. 810.

¹⁴ Peter Borellus (1670), *A Summary or Compendium of The Life of the most Famous Philosopher Renatus Descartes*, London: Printed by E. Okes, for Georges Palmer at the King and Duke of York’s Head near Arundel-House in the Strand.

¹⁵ Angus Armitage (1950), "René Descartes (1596-1650) and the early Royal Society", p. 15, quoting out of *The Diary of Robert Hooke*, ed. H.W. Robinson / W. Adams (1935), no. 12, vol. III, p. 234.

¹⁶ John Davies of Kidwelly was a friend of John Hall who demanded a reform of the university curriculum to rid it of its Aristotelian roots in his publication. See John Hall (1660), *An Humble Motion to the Parliament of England Concerning the Advancement of Learning: and Reformation of the Universities*, London: Printed for John Walker.

Kenelm Digby, who had always held very strong connections with France, published his *Two Treatises* in 1658, which were considerably influenced by his knowledge of Cartesianism.¹⁷ Hobbes' objections to Descartes' *The Meditations* including Descartes' answers first appeared in 1680 as an English translation by William Molyneux.¹⁸

Numerous works on Descartes, however, were produced for academic and elite circles like Antoin Le Grand's *Philosophia Veterum e Mente Renati Descartes* (1671), further his *Instituio philosophiae secundum principia D. Renati Descartes* (1672) or Johanne Schuler's *Exercitationes ad Principiorum Philosophiae Renati Des-Cartes* (1686).¹⁹ These publications were largely inaccessible to a greater literate audience. Paradoxically, a central premise of Cartesianism argued vociferously against any such form of restriction in the access to knowledge.

¹⁷ On Kenelm Digby's connections to France see R.T. Petersson (1956): „Sir Kenelm was really a citizen of the continent, living chiefly in France.“ In: R.T. Petersson (1956), *Sir Kenelm Digby*, p. 115.

¹⁸ William Molyneux (1680), *Six Metaphysical meditations; Wherein it is Proved that there is a God. And that Mans Mind is really distinct from his Body. Written originally in Latin by Renatus Des-Cartes. Hereunto are added the Objections made against these Meditations. By Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury. With the Authors Answers. All Faithfully translated into English, with a short Account of Des-Cartes Life. By William Molyneux*, London: Printed by B.G. for Benj. Tooke.

¹⁹ For instance: Antoin Le Grand (1671), *Philosophia Veterum e Mente Renati Descartes*, London: printed by J. Martyn. See also Antoin Le Grand (1672), *Instituio philosophiae secundum principia D. Renati Descartes*, London: Printed by J. Martyn. Or Johanne Schuler (1686), *Exercitationes ad Principiorum Philosophiae Renati Des-Cartes*, Cambridge: Ex officina Johan. Hayes, celeberrimae Academia Typographi. Impensis Johan. Creed. Bibliop. Cantab.

1.2. The English way of understanding

Comparing the English reception of Descartes with the Continental, however, it becomes quite obvious that the theories of the French philosopher were received by the English in a specific way. This specificity is probably responsible for the widespread opinion among historians of ideas that English culture had not been influenced by Descartes, when, in fact, it had been.²⁰ Although the most notable difference - the absence of Cartesian disciples as they existed in France²¹ - has to be acknowledged, Descartes' theories nevertheless had a strong impact in seventeenth-century England. The absence of *Cartésiennes*, as the followers of Descartes were called in France, was largely due to the specific English adaptation of Cartesianism. Rather than adapting their thinking to Cartesianism, Cartesianism was subsumed into the thinking of the English and is thus less easily detectable. It is significant to note this trait was symptomatic of both male and female writers. As with their male contemporaries, women rarely mentioned Descartes by name, yet appropriated vast portions of his thinking.

Joseph Glanvill in his work *The Vanity of Dogmatizing*, for instance, understood the ideas of the French philosopher as being spoken against an absolute truth. He understood Descartes as pursuing an intention to teach 'Ignorance' and thought his opinion "Confidence is arrogance, and Dogmatizing unreasonable presuming,"²² to be in exact accordance with Cartesianism.

²⁰ One of the most famous authors talking about a misunderstanding of Descartes by English thinkers is Ernst Cassirer (1953), *The Platonic Renaissance in England*, London: Nelson.

²¹ I will come back to this very interesting point in chapter 2 'Cartesianism and women'. This circumstance has its parallels in English women who were inspired by ideas of Descartes and were never *Cartésiennes* unlike their French female contemporaries.

²² Joseph Glanvill (1661), *The Vanity of Dogmatizing; or Confidence in Opinion Manifested in a Discourse of the Shortness and Uncertainty of Our Knowledge; and its Causes; with Some Reflections on Peripateticism; and an Apology for Philosophy*, London: Printed by E.C. for Henry Eversdett at the Grey Hound in St. Pauls-Church-Yard.

And though the Grand Secretary of Nature, the miraculous Des-Cartes have here infinitely out-done all the Philosophers went before him, in giving a particular and Analytical account of the Universal Fabrick: yet he intends his Principles but for Hypotheses, and never pretends that things are really or necessarily, as he hath supposed them: but that they may be admitted pertinently to solve the Phenomena, and are convenient supposals for the use of life.²³

His Cartesian understanding and enthusiasm finally culminated in the rewriting of Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*. In his version, the followers of the House of Salomon were transformed into Cartesians.²⁴

1.3. The popularity of Cartesianism

Cartesianism became increasingly popular in England for a variety of reasons. Part of the fascination originated in an enormous fear of atheism, to which Descartes' writing seemingly offered a solution. Seventeenth-century England was horrified by the notions of atheism and irreligion. According to Berman, atheism was "Europe's most fearful, threatening belief" which lasted "until the late eighteenth century".²⁵ Descartes came forward with his writing when the Church of England was much disrupted by religious queries that eventually contributed to the Civil War. The church courts collapsed in 1640 and censorship, which had been in the hands of the clergy, vanished. Anticlerical and heterodox doctrines could now be published more easily. As a consequence, many such tracts were circulated in the following years. Reform was demanded, both of the church and the universities, which were also controlled by the clergy. Hobbes was amongst those writers petitioning for change.²⁶ Arguing

²³ Ibid, p. 210-211.

²⁴ Joseph Glanvill (1676), *Essays on several important subjects in philosophy and religion*, London: Printed by J.D. for John Baker. In this case *Essay VII*.

²⁵ David Berman (1988), *A History of Atheism in Britain from Hobbes to Russell*, London: Routledge, p. 64.

²⁶ On Hobbes' atheism see Samuel I. Mintz (1962), *The hunting of Leviathan. Seventeenth-century reactions to the materialism and moral philosophy of Thomas Hobbes*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

from both reason and scripture, he declared moral obedience as existing on a purely secular basis.²⁷ He denied a notion of immaterial spirit, which he thought “was employed by clerics to frighten the laity into parting with power and wealth.”²⁸ “There are no incorporeal spirits, he said, and the clergy has no spiritual power - for all government is temporal.”²⁹ Although his intentions might not have been to promote disbelief in God, he soon earned a reputation as the ultimate atheist.³⁰ His materialism was understood as a substantial critique weakening the already disputed religious authorities.³¹ Hence, Hobbes’ writings did not only touch on existing cultural anxieties about atheism, they also took an active part in producing them. The variety of published works accusing Hobbes of heresy, “in being an enemy to the Faith, and Doctrine of the Church of England,”³² are a striking indicator of the severity with which threats of heresy were perceived. His condemnation became a public concern as epitomised by William Lucy’s tract against Hobbes: “the highest and greatest business of Church and State that, since the plantation of *Christian Religion* in *England*, ever any man had need to write of.”³³ Legal actions of the day were indicative of the perceived heretical threats. Two acts were implemented in the second half of the seventeenth century to combat atheism.³⁴

²⁷ Douglas Bush (1962), *English Literature in the earlier seventeenth Century 1600-1660*, p. 162-163.

²⁸ (Lev 46:464-7/372-4), David Berman (1988), p. 105.

²⁹ Ibid., (Lev 39:321-2/248), p. 105.

³⁰ On Hobbes’ intentions see David Berman (1988), *A History of Atheism in Britain*, p. 108.

³¹ While his *Elements of Law* and *De cive* set out a fundamental Anglican theology, his 1651 published *Leviathan* broke dramatically with that tradition. See Richard Tuck (1992), “Hobbes and Descartes”. On the question whether Hobbes was an atheist, see David Berman (1988).

³² See for instance John Dowel (1683), *The Leviathan Heretical or: The charge exhibited in Parliament against M. Hobbes, justified by the Refutation of a book of his, Entitled The Historical Narration of Heresie and the Punishments thereof*. Oxford: Printed by L. Lichfeld, and are to be sold by A. Stephens and William Lucy [Bishop of St. Davids] (1663), *Observations, ensures and convutations of notorious errors in Mr. Hobbes his Leviathan and other his books. To which are annexed occasionall animadversions on some writings of the Socinians, and such Haereticks; of the same opinions with him*. London: Printed by J.G. Nasth. Brooke at the Angel in Cornhill.

³³ William Lucy (1663), *Observations*, ‘The Epistle Dedicatory’.

³⁴ Two Acts against atheism: The first is dated 31 January 1666-67; the second 29 January 1677-78. Under the first people denying God are ‘only’ fined whereas they are criminalized under the second. This development can, according to Berman, be read as “a tentative conclusion that atheism was more threatening around 1677 than

The disturbing factors against law and order were countered by a general thirst for intellectual instruments controlling and uniting the opposing forces of the day. Descartes met those requirements with his theories, at least initially. He had, in opposition to Hobbes, desperately tried to maintain a spiritual presence in the material body although splitting the body from its mind. Thereby he initially avoided being suspected a materialist. Descartes understood the two units as connected and regarded the pineal gland as the seat of the soul where the physical and spiritual interacted. As a consequence he created harmony with both religion and science in the synthesis of divine and natural knowledge. Descartes' theories legitimised the progression of science, formerly perceived in opposition to religion, and secured the continuation of the 'penetration' of nature without meddling with heretics. Even though his radical doubt questioned all assumed truth, he was to be distinguished from other sceptics as his scepticism was perceived to have a fertile outcome. His principles re-established a 'genuine divine' truth attainable by the individual self which made proper use of the God-given faculties of reason – the Cartesian principle of equal rationality granted to all human beings. Thus, in view of a severely unstable and disrupted seventeenth-century England, Descartes' ability to unite diametrically opposed trends can be regarded as offering an intellectual alternative not only to elite circles, using Cartesianism for further theorising, but also on an individual level. This fact contributed to his popularity and explains why translations were so prevalent. This popularity only ended with the appearance of Locke on the intellectual stage, who had himself drawn heavily on Descartes for his own work.³⁵

it was in 1697 or in 1666", David Berman (1988), *A History of Atheism in Britain from Hobbes to Russell*, p. 48.

³⁵ On Locke and Cartesianism see Ernst Cassirer (1953), *The Platonic Renaissance in England*; John W. Yolton (1993), *Locke and the Way of Ideas*, London: Thoemmes Press, p. 4 and pp. 26; Peter A. Schouls (1980), *The Imposition of Method. A Study of Descartes and Locke*, Oxford: Clarendon Press; Charlotte S. Ware (1950), "The Influence of Descartes on John Locke. A Bibliographical Study", in: *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, vol. IV, pp. 210-230.

1.4. The universities and their role in disseminating Cartesianism

In the academic world, where Descartes' texts were studied first, his thinking was not welcomed univocally. In Oxford, a stronghold of scholasticism and very conservative in orientation, Descartes was read but not praised, as was the case in Cambridge. Nevertheless Oxford alumni, like Sir Kenelm Digby or Thomas Hobbes, Charles Cavendish and his brother the Duke of Newcastle, Sir William Boswell, and Samuel Hartlib, had studied enough Cartesianism at Oxford to form an opinion of it.³⁶ Cambridge, where Cartesianism first appeared in the 1640s, however, became a powerful centre of its dissemination especially through the Cambridge Platonists.³⁷ They believed Descartes to be a modern Platonist, creating a synthesis of divine and natural knowledge in harmony with both religion and science.³⁸ Henry More of Christ's College was a key figure in disseminating Cartesianism with colleagues like Ralph Cudworth. According to Charles Webster, they were "responsible for a considerable revival of English Platonism, which became an important factor in late seventeenth-century natural philosophy."³⁹ The Cambridge Platonists used Descartes' concept of innate ideas of divine origin in their battle against materialism. Henry More was teaching Descartes' *Dioptricks*, *Meteors*, and the first three parts of the *Principles* in 1674, and Cartesian ideas appeared in his *Democritus Platonissans* (1646). In 1648 More began writing to the French philosopher, and in 1650 he took up the defence of Descartes against Thomas Vaughan.

However, as Cartesian metaphysics looked less and less Platonic and Christian, More and many of his colleagues, radically turned from supporters of Cartesianism to open antagonists. The Cambridge Platonists are therefore

³⁶ On Cartesianism in Oxford see Nicholas Tyacke (1997), *The History of the University of Oxford*, vol. IV, pp. 405-411.

³⁷ On Cambridge Platonists see: Ernst Cassirer (1953), John Saveson (1960), "Differing reactions to Descartes among the Cambridge Platonists", in: *Journal of the History of Ideas*, pp. 560-567; C.A. Patrides (1969), *The Cambridge Platonists*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Stefan Weyer (1993), *Die Cambridge Platonists*; Anna Baldwin / Sarah Hutton (1994), *Platonism and the English Imagination*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; G.A.J. Rogers / J.M. Vienne / Y.C. Zarka (eds.) (1997), *The Cambridge Platonists in Philosophical Context. Politics, Metaphysics and Religion*.

³⁸ Douglas Bush (1962), *English Literature in the earlier seventeenth Century 1600-1660*, p. 365.

³⁹ C. Webster (1969), "Henry More and Descartes: Some new Sources", p. 359.

paradoxically noted both for their prompt and intense interest in Descartes' philosophy which played an important role in disseminating the ideas of Descartes and for their later active and influential opposition towards any mechanical world view, as exemplified by the writings of Hobbes and Descartes.⁴⁰

1.5. Science and Cartesianism

Cartesianism had a considerable influence among the scientific community. Here Descartes' metaphysics were very welcome. The change from Ptolomaic to Copernican logic had produced many questions that Cartesianism seemed to answer. Descartes' dualism, splitting the world into categories of mind and body, as well as his mathematical approach, were crucial to science, even though they were criticised repeatedly. Nonetheless "Cartesianism was about to become the matter for technical and profound investigation."⁴¹

England had already experienced a strong scientific development when Descartes' writing was published. Francis Bacon had shown how the world and its secrets were to be unlocked, focusing on the object, nature itself, and thereby setting a direction for English scientific thinking. The strong, prevailing interest in natural science formed part of Descartes' ideas. He pushed his arguments further than any of the English natural philosophers had done so far, using their 'fertilised' ground. His mathematical approach to natural philosophy clearly distinguished him from Bacon, who had advocated an experimental inductive method. By differentiating mind and body he empowered the rational mind to imagine an exact representation, to be specified by mathematics, of the object thus created.⁴² Initially this dualism seemed well balanced by the overall concept of God whose existence was crucial to cognition. Descartes had further introduced a radical doubt that opposed all assumed truth. 'Real' truth according to Descartes had to be re-established by the rational

⁴⁰ See C. Webster (1969), "Henry More and Descartes", p. 359 and Douglas Bush (1962), *English Literature in the earlier seventeenth Century 1600-1660*, p. 365.

⁴¹ Sterling Lamprecht (1935), "The Role of Descartes in Seventeenth-Century England", p. 207.

⁴² See also Jon Parkin (1999), *Science, Religion and Politics in Restoration England*, p. 153.

faculties of the individual and its God-given innate ideas. Although Descartes had thus started off as a sceptic, he ended by offering a theory of 'genuine divine' truth. Not only had he thereby constructed a scientific theory, but also come up with an holistic approach to be understood in terms of the re-establishment of a threatened symbolic social order. As a result, Cartesianism was much respected among the Royal Society and became an important element in English idealistic thought.⁴³ It was this respect that in England kept Cartesianism from falling victim to the proscriptions it had suffered in other parts of Europe, such as in Holland and France. Sterling Lamprecht explains: "because the members of this Society recognized and publicly expressed their indebtedness to Descartes, Descartes' works could hardly be prohibited without attacking the Society itself."⁴⁴

Although influential forces in England had long accepted the idea of dualism,⁴⁵ much criticism evolved from an empiricist perspective. Descartes' deductive method, his disparagement of the senses and his *a priori* procedure were sharply criticised. Isaac Barrow, one of the leading scientists of his days, although being much fascinated by Descartes, critiqued the French philosopher for his *a priori* procedure and thereby articulated a widely-felt criticism towards Cartesianism in England:

[I]t seemed good to him, not to learn from things, but to impose his own laws on things ... first, he collected and set up metaphysical truths which he considered suitable to his theory from notions implanted in his own mind ... next, from these, he descended to general principles of nature, and then generally advanced to particulars which, forsooth, he had framed without consulting Nature.⁴⁶

An empiricist critique is even more striking in Culverwel's work: "The certainty of sense is more grosse and palpable, the certainty of intellectuals, 'tis more cleere and

⁴³ See Louis I. Bredvold (1956), *The intellectual milieu of John Dryden. Studies in some aspects of seventeenth-century thought*, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, p. 60.

⁴⁴ Sterling Lamprecht (1935), "The Role of Descartes in Seventeenth-Century England", p. 197.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 182.

⁴⁶ Isaac Barrow (1660), *Euclide's Elements; the whole fifteen books compendiously demonstrated. With Archimedes Theorems of the Sphere and Cylinder, investigated by the method of Indivisibles and translated out of the Latin*. London, vol. IX, pp. 79-104.

crystalline ... Sense 'tis but the gate of certainty, ... the understanding 'tis the throne of it."⁴⁷ These critiques, however, regardless of their objectives did not diminish the interest in Descartes' scientific thinking - at least within a scientific sphere - until Newton formulated a new version of science, which for many rendered Cartesianism obsolete.

1.6. Popularising Cartesianism

Though the academic community had moved on, Cartesian ideas were not forgotten. Their readership, however, had changed from scientific and academic to wider circles. A literate middle class was emerging, consuming books that had become cheaper and more readily accessible to wider audiences. Curiosity about Descartes was shared by this new readership. Their interest in Descartes was not only scientific but also social and moral. Social hierarchies and the notion of static social order had long been questioned in seventeenth-century England. Descartes' way of empowering the individual by legitimising equal rational abilities regardless of social position seemed an adequate tool to justify a new social self-fashioning for men of the middle classes and women in general.

Cartesianism thus experienced a rising popular interest after the initial academic favour had subsided. It had been introduced to England through academic spheres to a very limited number of people, but was now taken over by wider audiences. This process was reinforced by popularised editions of Descartes' thought, like the English translation of Fournellis work *A Discourse written to a Learned Frier, By M. Des Fournellis; Shewing that the System of M. Descartes, and particular his Opinion concerning Brutes, does contain nothing dangerous ... To which is annexed the Systeme General of the same Cartesian Philosopher* of 1670. The first part by Fournellis dealt with the heretical potential of Cartesianism, comparing it with the prophecies of Moses and thereby proving their harmlessness,

⁴⁷ Nathaniel Culverwell (1652), *An Elegant and Learned Discourse of the Light of Nature*, p. 153.

while the appended work by Francis Bayle's gave '*The general Systeme of the Cartesian Philosophy*'.

One of the best-known and most widely-disseminated popularised versions of Cartesianism was Fontenelle's *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (1686).⁴⁸ It underwent several editions and was still published as late as 1737.⁴⁹ Its popularity confirms a large demand for literature explaining philosophy to a dilettante readership. Only two years after it had been published in France, several English translations appeared. Aphra Behn triumphed over John Glanvill in the race to publish the first translation of this work.⁵⁰ *A discourse of the plurality of the worlds* explained Copernican Astronomy and Descartes' physics. As this book was written for dilettantes, it was published in the form of a dialogue between a philosopher and his pupil, a Marquise. Behn thought this setting to be too silly and bold, as she stated in the Epistle. In an auspiciously self-confident manner she explained that she had thought of rewriting the whole work, for in her perception it was not adequately done. But as her time and health did not allow such an enterprise, she was forced to translate it, according to Fontenelle's original.⁵¹ However, some changes to the text, according to Behn, had to be undertaken to ensure comprehension: "I was necessitated to add a little in some places, otherwise the book could not have been understood" (Behn, 1688, no pagination). Her almost arrogant statement, full of self-assurance, is quite daring, considering the fact that women were normally not expected to meddle with sciences. Behn, nevertheless, made the reader not only sense her feeling of superiority towards Fontenelle, but at the same time demonstrated her advanced knowledge of philosophy, especially of Cartesianism.

⁴⁸ According to Hans Blumenberg it was one of the most successful enlightenment books ever published. See Brita Rang (1989), "'Frauenzimmerphilosophie' in den wissenschafts-propädeutischen Lehrbüchern für Frauen", p. 1. Rang argues that this popularity is due to the fact that the targeted readership changed from dilettantes to children.

⁴⁹ The late edition of 1737 is edited by Addison who updated it according to Newtonian principles.

⁵⁰ See Janet Todd (1996), *The secret life of Aphra Behn*, London: Andre Deutsch, p. 397. John Glanvill (1688), *A plurality of worlds written in French by the author of the Dialogues of the dead; translated into English by Mr. Glanvill*, London: printed for R. Bentley and S. Magnes.

⁵¹ "And I resolv'd either to give you the French Book into English, or to give you the subject quite changed and made my own; but having neither health nor leisure for the last I offer you the first such as it is." In Aphra Behn (1688), *A Discovery of New Worlds*, (there are no page numbers on the original copy).

For example, Fontenelle's use of the word 'tourboullion' is much criticised by Behn, bringing Descartes' notion of whirlwind into the discussion as much more adequate.

[B]ut Monsieur Des Cartes understands it in a more general sense, and I call it a Whirling; the Author hath given a very good Definition of it, and I need say no more, but that I retain the Word unwillingly, in regard of what I have said in the beginning of this Preface. (Behn 1688, no pagination)

Behn went even further in assuring the reader of her sound knowledge of Cartesianism. At the end of the Epistle, she explained her correction of an error about the height of the earth's atmosphere in the French original, which she believed to have originated in the printing process, thus following Descartes and Jacques Rohault who had written on physics according to Cartesian principles.⁵² She thereby proved a detailed knowledge of a broader discussion, taking place around Cartesianism.

I have made bold to correct a Fault of the French Copy, as to the height of our Air or Sphere of Activity of the Earth, which the French Copy makes twenty or thirty Leagues, I call it two or three, because sure this was a Fault of the Printer, and not a mistake of the Author. For both Monsieur Des Cartes, and Monsieur Rohault, both assert it to be but two or three Leagues.⁵³

The predecessor of Fontenelle's most successful popularisation of Cartesianism was Antoine LeGrand's *Instititio philosophiae secundum principia Renati Descartes...ad usum juventutis academicae*. This work went through successive editions, and was eventually translated in greatly enlarged form in 1694 by Richard Blome as *The Entire Body of Descartes' Philosophy*. Its essence was a summary of Cartesianism in formalised scholastic method, relying on Descartes' *Principles* that had so far not been translated,⁵⁴ and was said to be very successful.⁵⁵ Blome also addressed

⁵² Jacques Rohault (1682), *System of Natural Philosophy, illustrated with Dr. Samuel Clarke's Notes, Taken mostly out of Sir Isaac Newton's Philosophy*.

⁵³ Aphra Behn (1688), *A Discovery of New Worlds*. London: William Canning.

⁵⁴ There had been a Latin edition, *Principia Philosophia*, published in 1664 in London.

⁵⁵ Sterling Lamprecht (1935), "The Role of Descartes in Seventeenth-Century England", pp. 194-195.

readers who did not understand Latin and French by unlocking the knowledge of science being written in foreign languages as “otherwise very ingenious *Men*, are hereby debarr’d the *Study of Wisdom and Virtue*.”⁵⁶ In making Cartesian knowledge more accessible he significantly intended women to be among the readership of his book, even explicitly mentioning them in the preface of this work. Looking at the involvement of French women in philosophy, Blome went on to ask why English women were not allowed to be as learned as their French sisters?

Jacques Rohault's treatise, already mentioned by Behn, is another compendium on Cartesianism. Rohault explained physics according to Cartesian principles. It first appeared in England in 1682 in Bonnet's Latin translation with Le Grand's comments; and later, in 1697, Samuel Clarke's more successful edition, a translation of Latin into the vernacular, was published, which was easier to read and comprehend.⁵⁷

The controversy surrounding Cartesianism, discussed as a theory of interest to scientific, philosophic, educational and social interests, soon also surfaced in the literature and drama of the period. A passage from the play *The morning gamble* (1673) by Henry Nevil Payne reads: “This is the prettiest sort of New Philosophy in Love; right Descartes, it depends all upon motion. Why what would Lucrece, Cornelis, and the rest of the Ancient Husband Lovers say, did they see these days?”

Dryden did not mention Descartes, but acknowledged Cartesianism. He was a close friend of Hobbes' and must have known of the serious disagreements of the two philosophers. Dryden was much interested in Hobbes' ideas as well as in the advancement of the sciences and natural philosophy. Adam, one of the characters in

⁵⁶ Le Grand, Antoine (1694), *An entire Body of Philosophy, According to the Principles of the Famous Renate Des Cartes, In three Books. Written originally in Latin by the Learned Anthony Le Grand. Now carefully Translated from the last Corrections, Alterations, and large Additions of the Author, never yet Published*. London: printed by Samuel Roycraft, sold by Richard Blome. In this case: *Introduction*.

⁵⁷ According to Sterling P. Lamprecht, Rohault's treatise only held its popularity after Newton's great success because Clarke's edition contained abundant footnotes in which Descartes' errors were corrected according to Newtonian principles. See Sterling P. Lamprecht (1935). Angus Armitage identifies Rohault's work even as the source book for English students for the physics of Descartes. In: Angus Armitage (1950), "René Descartes (1596-1650) and the early Royal Society", p. 13.

his play *The State of Innocence* (1674) (an operatic version of *Paradise Lost*), rose repeating the very first words taken out of Descartes *Meditations*:

What am I? or from whence? For that I am I know, because I think. (The State of Innocence, Act II, sc. I (Works, V, 133-134)

Dryden was certainly no disciple of Descartes, yet as a writer of his day he had taken up Cartesianism as an intensely discussed topic in contemporary society and “tested out its argumentative strength in verse” rather than being eager to affirm and disseminate Descartes’ theories.⁵⁸

Jonathan Swift openly opposed Descartes. He did not approve of the idea of rational doctrine, of fixed methods and conclusions in theology.⁵⁹ He attacked the apparent “uselessness” of the new science. Jon Blandford Parker by identifying Swift and his opinions with those of the Augustans, describes their relation to Cartesianism like this:

All traditional method for them was abominable casuistry. The attempts of Descartes and the rationalists to restore a path, a method, which would be definitive and explanatory was met with the coldest mockery by Butler and Swift: Descartes was a Pythagorean, his spinning perpetually for no reason, he believed he was surrounded by devils. These were the jests of the Augustans towards the last great Scholastic personality of Europe.⁶⁰

The section of the *Voyage to Laputa* in Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) deals with the mathematical peculiarities of the Laputans in Swift’s finest mockery as he had done in his earlier work *The battle of the books* (1709).⁶¹ As Marjorie Nicolson writes, “Behind the Laputans lay the rapidly growing interest of the seventeenth century in mathematics, embodied in the work of Kepler, Descartes, Leibniz and many others,

⁵⁸ Louis I. Bredvold (1956), *The intellectual milieu of John Dryden*, p. 68.

⁵⁹ See Jon Blandford Parker (1998), *The triumph of Augustan poetics. English literary culture from Butler to Johnson*, p. 69.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Swift’s work *The battle of the books* can be understood as a reply to Fontenelle’s defence of the moderns.

and a persistent attitude of the seventeenth century layman toward the 'uselessness' of physical and mathematical learning."⁶²

Looking at the various ways in which Cartesianism spread, it can be concluded that the ideas of Descartes were well-known in seventeenth-century England. Not only pro-Cartesian sources had fostered such a climate, but the strongly critical controversy, largely undertaken especially in the 80s and 90s of the seventeenth century, played its part in disseminating Cartesianism to produce a wider knowledge. Sterling Lamprecht calls attention to the availability of Cartesianism in seventeenth-century England:

All phases of Descartes' philosophy, both sides of Cartesian controversy and both technical and popular treatments of Cartesian ideas were available in English before the end of the century. This accumulation of evidence, the overall number of works concerning Cartesianism, shows quite conclusively that Descartes had a considerable audience in England and that attention to his ideas was given by all classes of people who read books, and that interest kept up through the century.⁶³

Although Lamprecht concluded that Cartesianism had a 'considerable audience', regrettably, he did not investigate them in detail. The ideas of Descartes, however, seem to have been more prevalent than Lamprecht and other researchers suggest, when periodicals – much read by contemporary women – are also taken into consideration.

⁶² Marjorie Nicolson, (1937), "The Early Stages of Cartesianism in England", pp. 304-305.

⁶³ Sterling Lamprecht (1935), "The Role of Descartes in Seventeenth-Century England", p. 198.

1.7. Periodicals

By the end of the seventeenth century, periodicals had become increasingly popular. They were produced for a wider audience and characterised by the effort to target people who were formerly excluded from the practice of reading. Male and female readers were asked to contribute by sending in letters that were answered by the editors.⁶⁴ The editors originated mostly from the middle-class: “Editors such as Dunton and Defoe, were by birth, profession, or association situated outside of the elite, and lacking the marker of male elite culture, a classical education.”⁶⁵ It was requested that letters be written in English, rare Latin send-ins were translated. Women were assumed to form a substantial part of the readership and perceived as consumers who had to be satisfied.

According to David Cressy “by the 1690s the level of illiteracy among London women was reduced to 52% ... London became unusually demanding of literacy among its residents and was uniquely hospitable to developing female accomplishments.”⁶⁶ Thus, ‘the fair sex’ was explicitly addressed in periodicals, creating women as readers and writers. Peter Motteux, a Huguenot, for instance, declared as editor of the *Gentleman’s Journal* (1692) in the first issue that “The fair Sex need never fear to be exposed to the Blush, when they honour this with a Reading; ‘tis partly writ for them, and I am too much their Votary to be guilty of such a Crime ... this is no less the *Ladies Journal* than the *Gentlemens* ” (January, 1692). Periodicals published not only letters of the educated ‘few’ but also of wider audiences, including the emerging middle classes. It can be assumed that periodicals, in which all kinds of matter were discussed, provide a representative perspective on the broad circulation of Cartesian thought.

⁶⁴ For the authenticity of those letters see Kathryn Shevelow (1989), *Women and print culture*; London & New York: Routledge, p. 37-38: “Certainly, the often-heard editorial complaints about the unmanageable quantity of letters received could have served the purpose of advertising and self-inflation. And editors probably did have some hand in the writing of the letters. But the sheer volume and variety of correspondence in a number of different types of periodicals, the contemporary phenomenon Watt calls the ‘cult of letter-writing,’ and the survival of manuscript letters written to the editors of periodicals, suggest that the periodicals had no need to fabricate an audience desire to correspond with them.”

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 9.

⁶⁶ David Cressy (1980), *Literacy and the Social Order. Reading and writing in Tudor and Stuart England*, Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 129.

Interestingly enough, it can be noted that the appearance of periodicals can in itself be understood as striking evidence for a strong Cartesian impact. The request that readers submit questions implies that the opinion of the individual was perceived as important enough to be publicly discussed. Descartes had argued for equal rational abilities in all individuals and in accordance had postulated his concept of innate ideas, in which each individual was understood as knowing 'the truth' from within. This concept had a share in relocating the source of truth from the exterior (as the Platonist still understood truth to be) to the interior, into the individual, now enjoying the status of subject.⁶⁷ Descartes thereby created an "interest in the self rather than in the objective world known by the self"⁶⁸ and achieved, according to Roger, the most important objective a philosopher can achieve - "in making the English think."⁶⁹

The entire concept of the early periodicals with their epistolary structure can be identified as a representation of this newly felt self-assured consciousness especially recognisable in the nature of the posed questions. This consciousness corresponded with the intention of the editors to educate their readership by distributing knowledge. Later periodicals in comparison had exchanged those ideals and focused instead on moral instructions.⁷⁰ Retrospectively, this development is of some importance when judging Cartesianism and its differing consequences for women and gender relations.

I will here concentrate on the most successful early periodicals, namely *The Athenian Gazette* or *Mercury* as it was later called (1690/91), and *The Gentleman's Journal*, both very young phenomena of the nineties. In almost every issue of those periodicals Descartes' name is mentioned or questions touching on his theories are to be found (see Appendix I for questions in the *Athenian Gazette*).

⁶⁷ See Charles Taylor (1989), *Sources of the Self. The Making of Modern Identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, especially the excellent chapter on Descartes and on Cartesian inwardness, pp. 143-158.

⁶⁸ Charlotte S. Ware (1950), "The Influence of Descartes on John Locke", p. 220.

⁶⁹ See G.A.J. Rogers (1985), "Descartes and the English", p. 282.

⁷⁰ Kathryn Shevelov puts it like this: "But in the space of twenty years between the major periodicals of Dunton and Steele, the emphasis shifted from reform-as-knowledge to reform-as-behavior-modification." In: Kathryn Shevelov (1989), *Women and print culture*, p. 4.

The Athenian Gazette or *Mercury*, first and second volume, contains at least one question dealing with Cartesian coherence in every issue.⁷¹ Furthermore questions concerning the rational soul and its difference from the body, as well as questions on rationality were of great interest. What is reason and who possesses it? Does the individual possess innate ideas? Most questions dealing with Cartesianism did not mention the name of the French philosopher, in keeping with the method, discussed earlier, of the specifically English (i. e. tacit) adaptation of Descartes' ideas. Hence, it can be argued that Cartesian discourse was known to some extent by people who had never been exposed to Descartes' writings directly or even to philosophical writings in general.

The case of *The Gentleman's Journal* is much the same, though its structure differed from rival periodicals. In comparison to the *Athenian Mercury*, it included more information in its unique mixture of many different genres. Readers were also asked to submit contributions such as poems, stories, pieces on history, philosophy, music, etc. for a monthly-published issue. The "Huguenot" editor Motteux concentrated mainly on the French intellectual scene. As a result, he reported on the scientific progress of the Royal Academy in Paris by describing their experiments in detail. In those reports an effort was made to explain matters not only for scientific virtuosi but also for an unlearned audience.⁷² Motteux was a great supporter of a female readership and even devoted an entire issue to the ladies.⁷³ Each issue also reserved a section in which Motteux briefly introduced the newest books published in London and Paris. Due to the more serious quality of *The Gentleman's Journal* in dealing with scientific issues and Motteux's Francophile orientation, many contributions looked to Cartesianism or even exclusively discussed Descartes' ideas.⁷⁴

⁷¹ See appendix for detailed listing of questions for the first Volume of *The Athenian Gazette/Mercury*.

⁷² See a report on an experiment on the Vacuum of Royal Academy of Science (May, 1694, vol. III).

⁷³ See *The Ladies Journal, or the monthly Miscellany* October, 1693, vol. II.

⁷⁴ *A Discourse concerning the Ancients and the Moderns*, February 1692, vol. I, p. 19-23, which is continued in March 1692, vol. 1, p. 19-23; *On Descartes' Philosophy* see issue March, 1693, vol. II, p. 85.

Yet Cartesianism was not accepted without reservation. In fact, quite the opposite was true. Still, the number of contributions mentioning Descartes' name, picking up his theories or a Cartesian discourse can be interpreted as proof that an unlearned audience had been exposed to his philosophy. An examination of *The Athenian Gazette* and *The Gentleman's Journal* suggests that a broad Cartesian discourse was available to a general readership consisting of both men and women.

1.8. Conclusion

Seventeenth-century England is frequently understood as the period in which "the full significance of print as a medium of mass communication was finally recognised."⁷⁵ The number of printed books more than doubled and prices fell, consequently multiplying the number of book owners.⁷⁶ By the end of the seventeenth century the upper- and middle-classes almost fully depended on printed culture in transmitting and receiving information. Women, of course, participated in this trend. Within these sections of society, every household owned books or other printed media, which, even if not intended for them, were read by women.

In this chapter I have illustrated the wide dissemination and cultural significance of Cartesianism, demonstrating how the ideas of René Descartes were introduced to seventeenth-century England and outlining their subsequent reception. While initially access to Cartesianism remained restricted, it opened up to a wider audience as a result of the production of a Cartesian discourse not only by men but women as well. In the following chapter, I will discuss why Descartes' ideas were of particular interest to English women.

⁷⁵ John Feather (1993), *The Seventeenth-Century Book Trade*, Loughborough: Loughborough University, p. 17.

⁷⁶ See John Feather (1993): "The pace of publication significantly increased. The annual output of new books more than doubled between 1601 and 1700, reaching a peak of perhaps almost 2000 titles in 1680 ... What is certain, is that the number of books in circulation very significantly increased between the beginning and the end of the century, as did the number of titles." p. 14.

2. 'The mind has no sex.' Descartes' philosophy and its influence on the thought of literate English women

In chapter 1 we saw how widely disseminated Descartes' ideas were among women in seventeenth-century England. I would now like to discuss *why* Descartes' philosophy held such an attraction for contemporary English women. Descartes sought to provide a scientific theory which could form the basis of reliable truth, yet some of his ideas were extracted and adapted for social rather than scientific objectives. In Descartes' philosophy women discovered valuable tools with which to critically challenge their social position and its limitations.

2.1. Descartes – a supporter of women?

The question of the influence of Cartesianism on women and women's social standing raises the related, though not essential, question of Descartes' own position regarding women. While it was publicly known that Descartes exchanged letters with important women – his correspondents included Elisabeth of Bohemia, Princess Palatine and Queen Christina of Sweden – he did not have a reputation as a contributor to a broader discussion on the worth of women. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Descartes never made so much as a gesture toward contributing to discussions on prevailing gender conflicts.

Descartes' acquaintance with Christina of Sweden is well known. He dedicated his *Les Passions de L'Ame* (1649) to Christina, who was one of the strongest sovereigns in Europe with armies as powerful as France. She honoured the French philosopher with an invitation to her court to tutor her in philosophy, which he eventually accepted. Yet, the acquaintance was not devoid of (financial) self-interest on the part of Descartes, who was, as one biographer put it, "nearly flat broke". In fact, the dedication was written before he had even met her.¹

¹ Hector-Pierre Chanut who had spent time at Christina's court (and who later became French ambassador to Sweden) introduced Descartes and the Queen. See Richard Watson (2002), *Cogito, Ergo Sum. The Life of René Descartes*. Boston: David R. Godine Publisher, (chapter XIII: Queen Christina). Watson argues that Descartes had objections to accept the invitation of the Queen as he doubted her

Elisabeth, his other famous female correspondent, was the niece of Charles I and eldest Daughter of Charles' sister Elisabeth the late Queen of Bohemia. The Princess had read Descartes' *Discourse*, the *Essays*, and the *Meditations* and criticised his concept of the mind-body-split by questioning, then, how the two substances could interact.² Although she was indeed learned – she spoke English, German, French, Dutch, Italian, knew Latin and was good in mathematics – it was surprising that Descartes answered her critique when “he fobbed off and insulted numerous other critics.”³

Descartes made their intellectual friendship publicly known by dedicating his *Principia Philosophiae* (1644)⁴: “To the most serene Princess Elisabeth, eldest Daughter of Frederick, King of Bohemia, Count Palatine, and Elector of the Holy Roman Empire.” It was common practice to dedicate works to royal patrons, especially when patronage was needed, but, in this case, Descartes honoured Elisabeth not as his patron but for her outstanding rationality. He not only praised her for perfectly understanding his work but in the same breath commended her for understanding what learned men had not: “For since I compiled it to be read onely by a Princesse, whose wit is so far above the common pitch, that she conceives without difficulty what seemes hardest to our Doctours” (p. 15). While the fact that flattery holds a special place in the genre of the dedication cannot be overlooked, Descartes' representation of Elisabeth as endowed with greater understanding than even “learned doctors” must nevertheless be acknowledged. In so doing, he pits Elisabeth's female understanding against an Aristotelian curriculum, which formed the basis of European learning – and does so, furthermore, in a discourse intended for public consumption:

intellectual seriousness. He further sheds light on why Descartes eventually went to Sweden: “I believe Descartes went to Sweden because he was nearly flat broke.” p. 288.

² Max Bense (ed.) (1949), *René Descartes. Briefe 1629–1650*. Köln & Krefeld: Stauffen Verlag. Letters from Descartes to Elisabeth from p. 263. See further Andrea Nye (1999), *The Princess and the Philosopher. Letters of Elisabeth of the Palatine to René Descartes*. New York & Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield publishers.

³ Richard Watson (2002), *Cogito, Ergo Sum. The Life of René Descartes*. David R. Godine Publisher: Boston, p. 205 (chapter X: Princess Elisabeth).

⁴ Translated into French and published in 1647.

And I remark, in almost all those who are versant in Metaphysics, that they are wholly disinclined from Geometry, and, on the other hand, that the cultivators of Geometry have no ability for the investigations of the First Philosophy: insomuch that I can say with truth I know but one mind, and that is your own, to which both studies are alike congenial, and which I therefore, with propriety, designate incomparable. But what most of all enhances my admirations, that so accurate and varied an acquaintance with the whole circle of the sciences is not found in some aged doctor who has employed many years in contemplation, but in a Princess still young, and whose countenance and years would more fitly represent one of the Graces than a Muse or the sage Minerva.

(*The Principles of Philosophy*, p. 15)

The correspondence between Descartes and Elisabeth was known to the public as can be gathered from John Evelyn's book *Numismata*,⁵ where he included Elisabeth among other portraits of the most intellectually pre-eminent people of the time and praised her intellectual achievements. Epistolary exchanges between learned men and women were something like a genre of the time.⁶ Descartes' was therefore no exception, yet it may have added to the attraction his philosophy held for female readers.

These few examples of Descartes' intellectual dealings with women can only suggest his stance toward the gender issues of his day. Descartes' philosophy addresses the universal individual, presented as 'gender free' insofar as he does not give specified accounts for the instruction of men or women. What concerns us here, however, are not the intentions behind his work. In the final analysis, it is not his own position on the status of women that matters but the reception of his ideas. It is the force of the latter which exceeds authorial intention and to which we might refer today under the term 'intertextuality'. As Wolfgang Neuber writes of this phenomenon in the Early modern period,

⁵ Elisabeth of Bohemia was praised in the part he had written on outstanding learned people among those also Margaret Cavendish and Mary Astell. In: John Evelyn (1697), *Numismata. A Discourse of Medals, Ancient and Modern*, London: Printed for Benj. Tooke at the Middle-Temple-Gate, in Fleetstreet.

⁶ See Ruth Perry, „Radical Doubt and the Liberation of Women, p. 177.

The texts of the early modern period are to be understood as intentional assemblages of known discourses. Their theoretical *novitas* and *ingenium* are ensured through poetological and, in part – in the case of *Sachliteratur* – epistemological exertion. Moreover, writing of the early modern period is chiefly combinatory, intentionally selecting those elements of textual and philosophical traditions that prove useful for its own arguments.⁷

Neuber describes, here, how various texts, though originating from different contexts, were gathered up in the Early Modern Period in order to construct new arguments. These intertextual mosaics borrow as necessary from current intellectual thought without adhering to disciplinary boundaries. Moreover, Claus Zittel has shown that a complete demarcation of distinct scientific and social cultures of knowledge turns a blind eye to shared contexts and ideas,⁸ ignoring parallel developments. Only by approaching the question of the influence of Cartesianism on seventeenth-century women through the lens of such intertextuality can we begin to see Descartes' ideas as instruments for social strategy, despite their origin in a scientific context. In fact, it is out of this very impulse to examine the cross-germination of ideas outside the boundaries of individual texts and contexts that the concept of 'social Cartesianism' was born.

⁷ My translation. Original quote: „Die Texte der Frühen Neuzeit sind als intentionale Bündel bekannter Diskurse zu verstehen, ihre jeweilige *novitas* und ihr jeweiliges *ingenium* sind theoretisch abgesichert durch poetologische und – bei Texten der *Sachliteratur* – teils auch epistemologische Anstrengungen. In der Hauptsache ist frühneuzeitliches Schreiben darüber hinaus kombinatorisch, indem es ... absichtsvoll das aus den Schreib- und Denktraditionen herausgreift, was der eigenen Argumentation dienlich ist.“ In: Wolfgang Neuber (1994), „Topik und Intertextualität. Begriffshierarchie und ramistische Wissenschaft in Theodor Zwingers *Methodus Apodemica*,“ in: Wilhelm Kühlmann / Wolfgang Neuber, *Intertextualität in der Frühen Neuzeit (Frühneuzeit-Studien 2)*, p. 254.

⁸ See Claus Zittel (2002), „Konstruktionsprobleme des Sozialkonstruktivismus“, in: Claus Zittel (eds.), *Wissen und soziale Konstruktion*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, pp. 87-108.

2.2. The concept of social Cartesianism

Though the French philosopher saw his work primarily as a challenge to natural philosophy, Descartes' ideas quickly extended beyond the scientific community to exert a formative influence on the social thought of the time. Contemporary men and women were attracted by Descartes' philosophy and its affirmation of rational abilities, which they saw as a viable basis for gaining independence from various authorities. On a general level, Cartesianism provided instruments with which social hierarchies and social mobility could be challenged, while its questioning of custom and tradition offered women a promising concept with which to move beyond gender boundaries.⁹ The influences of Descartes' ideas on social thought are embodied by what scholars refer to as *social Cartesianism*. Carolyn Lougee was the first to introduce the term in her analysis of seventeenth-century French writing on women. There she examines the work of egalitarian thinker Poullain de la Barre¹⁰ and concludes that he was a *social Cartesian*. Poullain applied Descartes' thinking to the status of women on the basis of his doctrine of equal rationality and claimed equal rights for them. For Lougee, Poullain is "more simply and ruthlessly a social Cartesian, seizing upon the criterion of clear and distinct ideas and applying the method of doubt and rational examination to social issues."¹¹

⁹ Margaret Jacob has warned that Descartes' ideas were not exclusively used to challenge conventional hierarchies but also to ensure their preservation. In a critique on Paul Hazard's position that enlightenment ideals were uttered as early as the 1680s, she stated that at least for France Descartes' ideas were used to argue for absolutism and "for the domination over society by those ... groups capable of mastering the new science." Margaret C. Jacob (1987), "The Crisis of the European Mind: Hazard revisited," in: Phyllis Mack / Margaret C. Jacob, *Politics and Culture in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 251-271, in this case p. 268. See also Paul Hazard (1961), *La crise de la conscience européenne, 1680-1715*. Paris: Fayard.

¹⁰ There are two different ways of spelling the author's name: Poullain / Poulain. I will use 'Poullain' as in the English original sources unless quoted otherwise.

¹¹ Carolyn Lougee (1976), *Le Paradis des Femmes. Women, Salons, and Social Stratification in Seventeenth-Century France*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 19.

Siep Stuurman applies the term *social Cartesianism*,¹² as well, to Poullain de la Barre whose works were published in the 1670s in France¹³: “Poulain’s egalitarian philosophy was actually the first sustained attempt to apply Cartesian reasoning to the analysis of society, authority, and power.”¹⁴ Stuurman further explains that “Poulain presents the case for the equality of the sexes in all fields of social life, from intellectual pursuits to military skills.”¹⁵ He goes on to argue that the “physical and moral” philosophy which form the basis of Poullain’s attack on male supremacy was chiefly Cartesian.

Brita Rang employs the term *social Cartesianism* in establishing the context of her analyses of Anna Maria van Schurman’s works:

In the wake of intellectual Cartesianism, moreover, a cultural movement that could be described as social Cartesianism grew up. The first ‘feminist’ in France and England raised the issue of the position of women by referring to Descartes. Fundamental doubt served as a sort of tool with which to question traditional customs and practices, including the position of women.¹⁶

¹² Siep Stuurman (1997), "Social Cartesianism: Francois Poulain de la Barre and the Origins of the Enlightenment", in: *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 58, no. 4, pp. 617-640. And further Siep Stuurman (1998), "*L'egalité des sexes qui ne se conteste plus en France: feminism in the seventeenth century*", in: Tjitske Akkerman / Siep Stuurman (1998), *Perspectives on Feminist Political Thought in European History. From the Middle Ages to the Present*, London & New York: Routledge, pp. 67-84, in this case p. 76.

¹³ The three works are: *De l'Egalité des deux Sexes. Discours Physique et Moral, où l'on vout l'importance de se défaire des Préjugés*, (Paris, 1673); *De l'Education des Dames pour la Conduite de l'Esprit dans les Sciences et dans les Mœurs. Entretiens*, (Paris, 1674); *De l'Excellence des Hommes contre l'Egalité des Sexes*, (Paris, 1675).

¹⁴ Siep Stuurman (1997), "Social Cartesianism: Francois Poulain de la Barre and the Origins of the Enlightenment", p. 618.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 618.

¹⁶ Brita Rang (1998), "A 'learned wave': women of letters and science from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment", in: Tjitske Akkerman / Siep Stuurman (eds.), *Perspectives on Feminist Political Thought in European History*. London & New York: Routledge, pp. 60-66, in this case p. 63.

These analyses take up the concept of *social Cartesianism* to help explain the effects and importance of Descartes' ideas and their use in favour of women. I would like, here, to extend this work through an examination of Descartes' philosophy, in particular, the analysis of key instruments adapted for the advancement of women. My analysis focuses on the question, *which* of Descartes' ideas were turned into a social strategy and used to criticise the limited possibilities and positions of women in society. Of primary interest, here, are those secondary sources employing these instruments, which rely on a Cartesian logic to argue for the advancement of women. Such an approach opens up new material for our understanding of the relationship between Cartesianism and feminism, which previous work has not yet considered.

Descartes' female contemporaries recognized potential avenues in his philosophical texts which they could employ to effect social change. In my examination of primary sources relying on Cartesian arguments to criticise the social position of women, I have identified three principles which were extracted from Descartes' philosophy to this end: the first is the notion of equal rational abilities; the second, his rejection of the Aristotelian curriculum; and the third, his strategy of universal doubt. Before turning to our examination of these principles and how they spoke to women's concerns and the specific realities of their everyday lives, it is important to establish one of the primary contexts in which English women's reception of Cartesian philosophy took place, specifically with regard to the status of women's education in seventeenth-century England.

2.3. The education of seventeenth-century English girls and women

Extremely limited access to formal education represents one of the major difficulties faced by women in seventeenth-century England – indeed, this was a common experience for women throughout Europe. Women were viewed as men's subordinates since, as was commonly held, they lacked the male ability to reason – a postulate which was often used as an argument to oppose the education of girls and women.

Schooling was a private matter and not yet in the hands of the state. Whether a child was educated or not depended strongly on the financial means of the parents and on individual decisions. Boys were in every case better educated than their sisters regardless of social origin. As Helen M. Jewell explains, “one very striking feature of late medieval and early modern formal education is that it was dominated by social class, and almost exclusively male.”¹⁷

Despite a statute of 1406 permitting parents to send both boys and girls to school, girls were largely underrepresented in formal education. Margaret Spufford has shown that gender hierarchies were not the only factor contributing to the low number of girls of lower ranks with an extensive formal education. Poor education was rather a common feature for children of lower classes, including boys. Financial need and curricular structures which taught reading skills up to the age of seven, training children to write thereafter, excluded many older children, who were already put to work to earn money for their families, from schooling.¹⁸

In general, education served not only to teach reading and writing skills but was also intended to instruct pupils in the appropriate behaviour for their social position, gender and religious affiliation,¹⁹ with the goal of improving society as a whole. Advocates of formal education under the Tudors and early Stuarts were even

¹⁷ Helen M. Jewell (1998), *Education in Early Modern England*, London: Macmillan Press.

¹⁸ Margaret Spufford (1981), *Small Books and Pleasant Histories. Popular Fiction and its Readership in Seventeenth Century England*, Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 19.

¹⁹ See Elaine Hobby (1988), *Virtue of Necessity. English Women's Writing 1649-88*, Michigan: University of Michigan, p. 195.

convinced that Christian and humane learning would cure nearly every social ill.²⁰ Though education was intended to strengthen individual character and increase virtue, its objective was not to bring about any form of upward social mobility.

In some families – mostly high ranking – mothers assumed responsibility for teaching skills like reading and writing. In other families, tutors were employed. In many cases, girls and boys were not separated for this initial instruction taking place at home. As soon as boys were sent away from home to attend grammar school, however, the education of most girls ceased abruptly or changed considerably with respect to content. It was not felt necessary, for example, to teach girls Latin. Curricula for girls of higher ranks were often characterised by skills requisite to fulfil their expected social duties. Subjects such as needlework, dancing, singing and music made up a crucial part of a female education, the objective of which was always to make virtuous, sociable, obedient wives – the ‘natural’ destiny of a woman.

The humanist notion of the educated woman as intellectual companion to her husband was quite popular. However, it did not diverge from generally accepted gender hierarchies. A girl or woman was not educated for her own sake, to improve her life or be able to make choices. Her education was geared toward making her a better wife, an intellectual (yet subordinate) companion to her husband and a wise teacher to her children, enriching the home with music and conversation. Too much learning was unchaste. That a woman’s knowledge should exceed that of her future husband’s was unimaginable. Girls’ education thus had to be carefully guided, as it weighed heavily in the making of a good match.

To reject the generally accepted ideal of womanhood, to claim a world of books as their own – a privilege reserved for men – was a dangerous thing. Women were not to meddle with subjects unsuited to their ‘nature’. It threatened the triumvirate of chastity, silence and obedience.²¹ A good modest woman spoke little,

²⁰ “It would root out ignorance and, consequently, poverty; it would establish the light of God in what they regarded as the darkness spread by Rome; it would open the door to advancement to young men and thus contribute to the peace of progress of the realm.” In: John R. Mulder (1969), *The Temple of the Mind: Education and Literary Taste in Seventeenth-Century England*, New York: Pegasus, p. 15.

²¹ See also Christina Luckyj (2002), *‘A moving Rhetoricke’. Gender and silence in early modern England*. Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, p. 3.

whereas excessive speech was considered immodest and unchaste. A woman's behaviour was crucial as it not only represented her own reputation but reflected on that of her entire family. Thomas Bentley wrote in 1592 "a daughter that is bold dishonoureth both her father, and hir [sic!] husband".²²

In early seventeenth-century England, learned literature such as scientific or philosophical texts were always published in Latin, which posed an obstacle even for literate English women, who, as we saw earlier, were not instructed in Latin or any other foreign language – a fate shared by men of the lower classes, as well. Elaine Hobby describes the effect of this restriction: "those men and women who knew no Latin were thereby excluded from the most mundane points of reference of learned dispute."²³

Educational reforms in the course of the seventeenth century changed this situation in England but unfortunately exclusively for men.²⁴ Hilda L. Smith argues that the Renaissance "was a period in which educational and public service opportunities were opening for men but remained closed to women."²⁵ Janet Todd shows that growing educational opportunities for men of lower ranks had an effect on women, in particular on those of higher social rank.

At a time when a few women were apprehending the rational character of *all* humanity, and when men from the middle and lower orders were increasingly included in education, women's exclusion from all institutions of higher learning whatever their rank was especially galling.²⁶

²² Thomas Bentley (1582), *The monument of matrons; Conteyning seven severall lamps of virginities*, III, p. 35 (STC 1892).

²³ See Elaine Hobby (1988), *Virtue of Necessity*, p. 192.

²⁴ See for instance John R. Mulder: "When Charles I ascended his throne, almost ten per cent of the approximately 5,400 students enrolled at Oxford and Cambridge were poor boys on scholarships." p. 15. In: John R. Mulder (1969), *The Temple of the Mind*, p. 13.

²⁵ Hilda L. Smith (1982), *Reason's Disciples. Seventeenth-Century English Feminists*, Urbana & London: University of Illinois Press, p. 40.

²⁶ Janet Todd (1989), *The Sign of Angellica. Women, Writing, and Fiction 1660-1800*, London: Virago, p. 30.

These conflicts of rank and gender caused many women (and some men) to question the general cultural assumption that women were unfit for learning and should thus be excluded from formal education. Certain of Descartes' theories, to which I will now turn, became key instruments in women's challenge to these traditional beliefs.

2.4. Descartes' notion of equal individual rational abilities

Throughout his life Descartes strove to renew the foundation of philosophy, which was in his opinion unable to produce "real truth". His lifelong effort was, thus, to produce a method based upon principles leading to certainty and unified truth. Unlike other contemporary theorists, he placed the individual at the centre of thought. The starting point of Descartes' thinking was based on an assumption, anticipating enlightenment thought, that all individuals possess equal rationality. The ability to reason not only distinguishes man from beast in this understanding but belongs to each individual: "for as for Reason or Understanding, for as much as it is the only thing which makes us Men, and distinguisheth us from beasts, I will believe it to be entire in every One" (*Discourse*, p. 4).

Descartes was convinced that the individual carried the capacity to gain certainty²⁷ through his (or her) own natural light:²⁸ "the faculty of right-judging and distinguishing truth from falshood (which is properly call'd Understanding or Reason) is naturall equal in all Men" (*Discourse*, p. 3). In Descartes' view, each individual was, in Neo-Platonic fashion, equipped with innate ideas of divine origin, resembling

²⁷ On the problem of certainty in Descartes' thinking see Peter Markie (1998), "The Cogito and its Importance", in: John Cottingham (ed.), *Descartes*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 50-78.

²⁸ For my research I dealt with the classical Descartes and not with his thinking of younger years. For a detailed analysis of this earlier phase and for a perspective how Descartes transformed traditional concepts of method into a general methodology see Claus Zittel (2000), "Mirabilis scientiae fundamenta. Die Philosophie des jungen Descartes (1619-1628)", in: Jörg Jochen Berns / Wolfgang Neuber (eds.) (2000), *Seelenmaschinen. Gattungstraditionen, Funktionen und Leistungsgrenzen der Mnemotechniken vom späten Mittelalter bis zum Beginn der Moderne (Frühneuzeit Studien N.F. 2)*, Wien & Köln & Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, pp. 309-362.

objects themselves. The perfection of the objects made Descartes believe that they had been put into the individual by a divine hand: “So as it followed, that it must have bin [sic!] put into me by a Nature which was truly more perfect then *I*, and even which had in it all the perfections wherof I could have an *Idea*,” (*Discourse*, p. 55). Every individual carried subsequently the source of reliable truth within himself (herself) in the form of divine innate ideas.

But Descartes’ strategy was twofold: on the one hand, he promoted a process of individual introspection, as truth was to be found within. The impulses, however, were to come from the outside – from worldly objects:

[A]s soon as my years freed me from the subjection of my Tutors, I wholly gave over the study of Letters, and resolving to seek no other knowledge but what I could finde in my self, or in the great book of the World, I imployed the rest of my youth in Travell, to see Courts and Armies, to frequent people of severall humors and conditions, to gain experience. (*Discourse*, p. 15).

Descartes had thereby not only postulated a new understanding of the world as readily comprehensible but had simultaneously authorised each individual to find truth in himself (or herself) qua the existence of an equal rationality which had direct access to divine innate ideas.

In his study on the self, Charles Taylor examines Descartes’ adaptation of the prerequisites of Augustine and Plato.²⁹ Descartes borrows from Plato the concept that objects were perfect only in the sphere of God and merges it with Augustine’s belief that God, as well as truth, comes from within. Taylor describes Descartes’ epoch making twist as:

²⁹ Charles Taylor (1989), *The Sources of the Self*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 143.

The internalization wrought by the modern age, of which Descartes's formulation was one of the most important and influential, is very different from Augustine's. It does, in a very real sense, place the moral sources within us. Relative to Plato, and relative to Augustine, it brings about in each case a transposition by which we no longer see ourselves as related to moral sources outside of us, or at least not at all in the same way. An important power has been internalized.³⁰

Individual cognition was made independent from outside factors through this "internalisation" and, in Descartes' understanding, depended entirely on the proper use of the rational faculties.

Descartes' notion of equal individual rationality enabled the conception of cognitive processes independent of the individual's social and sexual origin.³¹ Cognition took place beyond sex and gender – that is at least one interpretation of a Cartesian logic, hence the conclusion: the mind has no sex. Descartes' notion of equal rationality was indeed adapted as such in seventeenth-century England. His postulate of equal individual rationality inspired his female contemporaries and clearly strengthened their own belief in their rational and intellectual capacities, which had long been doubted. This new-found confirmation of their innate abilities helped many women to develop an extraordinary intellectual self-assurance, an appetite for learning and to become generally involved with subjects for which they were not thought fit.

Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle (1623–1673) was the first woman to employ Cartesian logic to claim rationality for herself and her female contemporaries in England. Cavendish criticised that access to intellectual culture was seen and reserved as a male prerogative, a restriction for which she could find no justification since "all braines work naturally, and incessantly, in some kinde or other"³², including those of women. She publicly aired her grievances about her own

³⁰ Charles Taylor (1989), *The Sources of the Self*, p. 143.

³¹ See also Ina Schabert (1997), *Englische Literaturgeschichte aus der Sicht der Geschlechterforschung*, Stuttgart: Kröner, p. 207.

³² Margaret Cavendish (1653), *Poems and Fancies*, London: Printed for T.R. for J. Martin, and J Allestrye at the Bell in Saint Pauls Church Yard.

frequent experience, bitterly condemning all that women who “meddled” in the intellectual realm had to endure. Women, she asserted, were equipped with rational capacities identical to those of men, though male contemporaries were “thinking it impossible we [women] should have either learning or understanding, wit or judgment, as if we had not rational souls as well as men.”³³

Cavendish’s work is representative for our understanding of the repercussions of Descartes’ thinking on English women. Already quite self-confident on account of her high-aristocratic background, Cavendish used Cartesian logic and rhetoric to claim an intellectual territory for herself and her female contemporaries. As outlined in chapter 3, Cavendish was one of the first English women who wrote specifically for publication, presenting her books under her own name³⁴ and even daring to address one of her works³⁵ to the strongholds of male dominated learning – the universities Oxford and Cambridge.

Other female authors also claimed rationality for women. Sarah Fyge Field Egerton (c.1670–c.1722) drew on Cartesian principles in her work *The Female Advocate, or, An Answer to a Late Satyr Against Pride, Lust and Inconstancy of Woman* anonymously published in 1686, claiming that “a male and a female, both of the same Species, [are] both indued with the like rational souls.”³⁶ Her work took on added significance as a direct response and refutation to the misogynist piece *A Late Satyr Against the Pride, Lust and Inconstancy of Woman* by Robert Gould published in 1682. For Gould women were the centre of sin and Eve the intention of the devil.

³³ Margaret Cavendish (1655), *The Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, London: Printed for J. Martin, and J. Allestrye, in this case part: To the Two Universities, no pagination).

³⁴ Mary Wroth was another woman who had dared to publish under her own name. Mary Wroth (1621), *The Countesse of Montegomeries Urania*, London: J. Marriott and J. Grismand.

³⁵ See Margaret Cavendish (1655), *The Philosophical and Physical Opinions*.

³⁶ Sarah Fyge Field Egerton (1686), *The female Advocate. Or, An answer To A Late Satyr Against The Pride, Lust and Inconstancy, etc. of Woman. Written by a Lady in Vindication of her Sex*. London.

Mary Astell (1666-1731) is probably the best example of an English adaptation of the Cartesian notion of equal rationality. She proposed the foundation of an educational institution for girls and women of wealthy families in her work *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (first part 1694, second part 1697, published anonymously). The texts focus mainly on increasing women's involvement in religion. She argued that God had given the individual a rational soul and that this gift brought with it the obligation also for women to cultivate their potential: "For since GOD has given Women as well as Men intelligent Souls, why should they be forbidden to improve them?"³⁷ Astell strongly condemned wealthy women for spending their time with unproductive leisure activities, wasting this rational potential.

Since he [God] has not denied us [women] the faculty of Thinking, why shou'd we not (at least in gratitude to him) employ our thoughts on himself their noblest Object, and not unworthily bestow them on Trifles and Gaities and secular Affairs?³⁸

In the same year Astell's first *Proposal* had been presented to a general readership, *An Essay in the Defence of the female Sex* (1694) was also published. The author of this popular piece, which went through three editions by the end of the century, was Judith Drake. Although published anonymously, the sex of the treatise's author was revealed in speaking openly for the female sex and discussing the question "whether the time an ingenious Gentleman spends in the Company of Women, may justly be said to be misemploy'd, or not?"³⁹ Drake formulated her belief in a Cartesian rhetoric that women were in possession of the same rational power as men "all Souls are equal, and alike, and that consequently there is no such distinction, as Male and Female Souls;"⁴⁰ As a kind of follow-up, another essay was published by an unknown author under the title *A farther essay relating on the female sex*, which also argued for the equal rational abilities of women and men: "There's an *Immortal Spirit* in both

³⁷ Mary Astell (1694), *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, London: Wilkin, p. 22.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Judith Drake (1694), *An Essay in the Defence of the female Sex*, London: Printed for A. Roper and E. Wilkinson at the Black Boy, and R. Clavel at the Peacock, in Fleetstreet, p. 6.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 11.

Sexes, for the Soul is a spiritual Essence equally capable of exerting its Intellectual Operations in the fair Sex, as well as in Men;”⁴¹

Yet, it was by no means only female authors who claimed the concept of equal rational capabilities extended to women as well. There were many men who shared this view. Poullain de la Barre’s work *The Woman as Good as the Man: Or Equality of Both Sexes*⁴² (1677) had originally been published in French in 1673 but was soon after translated and published in England. Poullain went much further than any of his contemporaries in demanding a radical equality of the sexes on the basis of Cartesian rational equality: “we have found that both Sexes are equal; that is to say, that women are as noble, as perfect, and as capable as men.” Poullain’s argument culminated with the audacious claim that women could even become politicians and hold military ranks.

The Cartesian postulate of equal individual rationality worked as an *empowerment strategy* for many women. It offered justification for them to become involved in realms from which they had formerly been excluded, to encroach upon male territory and claim for themselves male prerogatives. Beginning in 1650, a growing number of women published⁴³ and some contributed publicly to the discussion on the worth and social position of women.⁴⁴ Though many other

⁴¹ Anonymous (1696), *A farther essay relating on the female-sex. Containing Six Characters, and Six Perfections of Self-Love. To which is added, a character of a Compleat Beau*, London: Printed for A. Roper and E. Wilkinson at the Black-Boy in Fleet-street, in this case D2.

⁴² The original: Poullain de la Barre (1673), *De l’Egalité des deux Sexes. Discours Physique et Moral, où l’on voit l’importance de se défaire des Préjugés*. English translation: Poullain de la Barre (1677), *The Woman as Good as the Man: Or Equality of Both Sexes. Written Originally in French And Translated into English by A.L.*, London: Printed by T.M. for N. Brooks, at the Angel in Cornhil.

⁴³ On women publishing see for instance Patricia Crawford (1985), “Women’s Published Writings 1600-1700”, in: *Women in English Society 1500-1800*, London & New York: Methuen, pp. 211-282.

⁴⁴ This phase which is generally known as the *querelle des femmes* is called pamphlet wars for England. On the pamphlet wars see for instance Katherine Usher Henderson / Barbara F. McManus (1985), *Half Humankind. Contexts and texts of the controversy about women in England 1540–1640*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, p. 11; Linda Woodbridge (1984), *Women and the English Renaissance*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press; Francis Lee Utley (1944), *The Crooked Rib*. Columbus: Ohio State University; and Diana Purkiss (1992), “Material Girls: The Seventeenth-Century Women debate,” in: Clare Brant / Diana Purkiss (eds.) (1992),

influences, including religious sects and the civil war, contributed to the dynamic that women raised their voices in speaking for their own behalf, Cartesianism played a major role in this female empowerment.

One of the major claims deriving from Descartes' postulate of equal rational abilities was the demand that women be included in formal education. If women possess the same rational abilities as their male contemporaries, so the argument, how could it be that they were excluded from formal education? As we will later see, it was Cavendish who acted as a pioneer in claiming formal education for girls and women, having herself painfully experienced the restrictions of a woman whose education had only been geared toward making a good wife, but who nevertheless longed to study natural philosophy. In her opinion, women have

[B]ecome like worms that onely live in the dull earth of ignorance, winding our selves sometimes out, by the help of some refreshing rain of good educations which seldom is given us; for we are kept like birds in cages to hop up and down in our houses, not sufferd to fly abroad to see the several changes of fortune, and the various humors, ordained and created by nature.⁴⁵

Bathsua Makin (c.1601–c.1675), a middle class woman, who fought for the education of girls and women⁴⁶ by founding a school for the daughters of the gentry and wealthy, praised Cavendish in a publication attributed to her entitled *An Essay to Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen*.⁴⁷ “The present Duchess of Newcastle, by her own genius, rather than any timely instruction, over-tops many

Women, Texts & Histories 1675-1760, London & New York: Routledge. For a recent re-evaluation of the *querelle* see Gisela Engel / Friederike Hassauer et al. (eds.) (2004), *Geschlechterstreit am Beginn der europäischen Moderne. Die Querelle des Femmes*. Königstein: Helmer.

⁴⁵ Margaret Cavendish (1655), *The Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, in part: *To the Two Universities*.

⁴⁶ Bathsua Makin had further been appointed tutoress to Princess Elizabeth, the six-year-old daughter of Charles I. and mother of Elizabeth of Bohemia.

⁴⁷ There is a controversy around the authorship of this work which was published anonymously and in which the author in the prefatory epistle clearly states that he is a man. Noel Malcolm has argued that Makin was possibly copying from Mark Lewis' work *Apologie for a Grammar* (1671) or that he himself had written this part. See Noel Malcolm, “The Lady vanishes”, in: *Times Literary Supplement*, 5 November 1999, p. 28.

grave gownmen.” Makin, who was known in England as the most learned woman in the country,⁴⁸ equally used the argument of rational women to demand their intellectual training: “Had God intended women only as a finer sort of cattle, He would not have made them reasonable.”⁴⁹ She opened a school in Tottenham High Cross for upper class girls which was the first known attempt to organize a curriculum of study for girls which taught subjects previously restricted to boys: experimental science, astronomy, geography, botany, geology, mineralogy, arithmetic and mathematics offered in combination with domestic arts. This format became the standard in a great number of girls' schools up to the end of the nineteenth century.⁵⁰

Makin was influenced by Anna Maria van Schurman (1607-1678), who had written her letters in Greek.⁵¹ Schurman advocated a broad and liberal curriculum for girls and women. She was well known also outside Holland as the most famous learned woman of the seventeenth century, named the “star of Utrecht”. Schurman had conversed with Descartes and debated scholastic science with him. She further exchanged letters with intellectuals of the day on the topic of female education. Her *Dissertatio Logica*⁵² was a defence of women's education, written as an exercise on logic and published in 1638 in Paris.⁵³ It was translated into English in 1659⁵⁴ by

⁴⁸ See introduction by Frances Teague in: Betty S. Travitsky and Patrick Cullen (2001), *The Early Modern Englishwoman: A facsimile Library of Essential Works*, Series II: Printed Writings, 1641-1700: part I, vol. 5: Educational and Vocational Books, Aldershot & Burlington USA: Ashgate, p. xi.

⁴⁹ Bathsua Makin (1673), *An Essay to Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen*, p. 10.

⁵⁰ See also Patricia Phillips (1990), *The Scientific Lady. A Social History of Woman's Scientific Interest 1520-1918*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

⁵¹ The letters are printed in Schurman's *Opuscula*. See Anna Maria van Schurman (1648), *Opuscula*, Leiden: printer not named.

⁵² Schurman's *Disseratio Logica* had been commented by her intellectual correspondent André Rivet, professor of theology in Leiden and only published then. Rivet had always been a strong supporter of her intellectual pursuits and her logic exercises on whether women should be educated.

⁵³ Caroline van Eck argues that Schurman had deliberately chosen an academic style to reach a learned audience. See Caroline van Eck (1996), “The first Dutch feminist Tract? Anna Maria van Schurman's discussion of women's aptitude for the study of art and sciences,” in: Mirjam De Baar / Machteld Löwensteyn / Marit Monteiro (eds.) (1996), *Choosing the Better Part. Anna Maria van Schurman (1607-1678)*, Dordrecht & London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, pp. 43-53, in this case p. 52.

⁵⁴ There has probably been an earlier translation in to English which is now lost as the dedication reads “This strange maid, being now the second time, drest up in her

Clement Barksdale under the title *The Learned Maid; or, Whether a Maid may be a Scholar*.⁵⁵ Schurman voiced her understanding that women had the same access to truth as their male contemporaries, referring to a Cartesian equal rationality. This legitimated women in her understanding to take part in formal education.

Whosoever is naturally endu'd with the *Principles* or powers of the principles (7) of all Arts and Sciences, may be a student in all Arts and Sciences: But Maids are naturally endued with the *Principles*.⁵⁶

It is interesting to see that Schurman was able to enter a territory which was considered closed to women by using rational arguments. As a Latinist with a great reputation, she wrote the ode on the occasion of the founding of the University of Utrecht.⁵⁷ Through her intellectual friendship with Gisbertus Voetius, rector of the Academy of Utrecht, Schurman was allowed to attend lectures in a special loge, becoming the first female student at a Dutch university.

In another anonymously published work, *A farther essay relating on the female-sex*⁵⁸ the unknown author claimed learning and consequently knowledge for her female contemporaries, dubbing those who opposed the idea ignorant:

[A]nd if human Nature is destined to laborious Employments, which, to qualify them for *Knowledge and a studious* application, is absolutely necessary; the *Female Sex* ... are not excluded from the benefit of Learning: For *Knowledge* is necessary to the Universe, and those who

English Habit, cometh to kiss your hand" (*The Learned Maid*, p. A4). Myra Reynolds believes the dedication to Lady A.H. to be to Lady Anne Hudson. See Myra Reynolds (1920), *The Learned Lady in England (1650-1760)*, Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, The Riverside Press Cambridge.

⁵⁵ Anna Maria van Schurman (1659), *The learned Maid; or, Whether a Maid may be a Scholar. Logick Exercise Written in Latine by that incomparable Virgin Anna Maria à Schurman of Utraecht. With some Epistles to the famous Gassendus and others*. London: Printed by John Redmayne. See also a recent translation in Joyce L. Irwin (ed.) Anna Maria van Schurman (1998), *Whether a Christian Woman should be educated*, Chicago & London, The University of Chicago Press, pp. 25-37.

⁵⁶ Anna Maria van Schurman (1659), *The learned Maid*; p. 6-7.

⁵⁷ See Myra Reynolds, *The Learned Lady*, p. 271.

⁵⁸ Anonymously (1696), *A farther essay relating on the female-sex*.

endeavour to corrupt it, this Ignorance of theirs no ways depreiates the light of *Knowledge*.⁵⁹ (*A farther essay relating on the female-sex*, D2)

Mary Astell was one of the strongest supporters of the demand for educating girls and women. Her two parts of *A serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694 & 1697) argued for the education of female rational potential, proposing an institution be founded in which this potential would be cultivated. The exclusion of women from formal education had, in her eyes, negative consequences for the entire society and her aim was to end this injustice through educational reform which would have its beginnings in the proposed institution.

But there were also men who claimed the right to education for girls and women on the basis of the Cartesian postulate of equal rationality. Clement Barksdale (1609-1687) who had translated Schurman's work, proposed that it was time to establish a women's college at Oxford in his essay *Letter Touching A Colledge of Maids; or a Virgin Society* in 1675⁶⁰. He argued that girls and women had the same rational capacity as men. The aim of his proposal was to establish an up-to-date and thorough education for girls with a strong emphasis on science.

⁵⁹ This work is attributed to Astell in the Folger Shakespeare catalogue. Astell, however, has not written it. Neither did Drake produce the *Essay in Defense of the Female Sex* (1696). According to Rae Blanchard (1929), "Richard Steele and the Status of Women," in: *Studies in Philology*, vol. 27, pp. 325-55; it is the translation of Madame de Pringy's (1694), *Les differens caractères des femmes du siècle ... Contenant six caractères et six perfection*. See also Ruth Perry (1986), *The celebrated Mary Astell. An Early English Feminist*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, p. 490, Footnote 25. The dedication is signed with Ez. Symson. Printers of Drake's book and this one are the same.

⁶⁰ Clement Barksdale (1675), *A Letter Touching a Colledge of Maids: or, A Virgin-Society, written 12 Aug 1675*. No publisher information is given on the copy in the British Library.

The clergyman George Hickes, too, argued for female education. He proposed the building of “Schools, or Colleges for the Education of young Women, much like unto those in the Universities, for the Education of young Men”,⁶¹ seeing grave danger in leaving rational women uneducated “who are so silly and deceiveable [sic!] for want of Ingenious, and Orthodox Education, and not for want of Parts.”⁶²

Descartes’ philosophy, then, supported the argument for educating women by suggesting that they were endowed with the same capacity for reason as their male counterparts. Yet his philosophy held further potential for women’s education and active participation in intellectual culture in its rejection of an Aristotelian curriculum.

2.5. Descartes’ rejection of the Aristotelian curriculum

Though Descartes had been educated in “one of the most famous Schools in *Europe*” (*Discourse*, p. 7) – the Jesuit College La Flèche – he had lost his faith in formal education as “there was no such learning in the world, as formerly I had been made believe” (*Discourse*, p. 8). It left him highly unsatisfied, feeling he had only gained doubt and uncertainty.

I have been bred up to Letters from mine infancy; & because I was perswaded, that by their means a man might acquire a clear and certain knowledge of all that’s usefull for this life, I was extremely desirous to learn them: But as soon as I had finish’d all the course of my Studies, at the end whereof Men are usually receiv’d amongst the rank of the learned. I wholly changed my opinion, for I found my self intangled in so many doubts and errors, that me [sic!] thoughts had made not other

⁶¹ George Hickes (1684), A Sermon preached at the Church of *St. Bridget*, on *Easter-Tuesday*, being the first *April*, 1684. Before the Right Honourable Sir Henry Tulse. Lord Mayor of London. And the Honourable Court of Aldermen, Together with the Governors of the Hospitals, upon the Subject of *Alms-giving*. By George Hickes, D. D. Dean of Worcester, and Chaplain in Ordinary to his Majesty. London, Printed for *W. Kettilby*, at the *Bishops-Head* in St. Paul’s Church-yard, and *P. Kettlewell*, at the *Hand and Scepter* in Fleet-Street.

⁶² Ibid.

profit in seeking to instruct my self, but that I had the more discovered mine own ignorance. (*Discourse*, p. 7)

Descartes concluded in his analysis of education that “there is nothing which is undisputed, and by consequence, which is not doubtfull” (*Discourse*, p. 13). The variety of opinions among learned men indicated to him that reliable and unified truth had yet not been found. “And considering how many different opinions there may be on the same thing, maintain’d by learned Men, and yet that there never can be but one only Truth, I reputed almost all false which had no more then probability in it” (*Discourse*, p. 13).

Descartes thus criticised the curriculum, which in his view had proved unable to produce reliable truth. His critique turned against a general tradition of scholasticism, which John Cottingham described as “the comprehensive body of philosophy based on the teachings of Aristotle, as systematically adapted to the demands of the Christian faith by the great thirteenth-century philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas.”⁶³ A scholastic education concentrated on merely two features as an exercise of the intellect: the study of formal logic and the practice of disputation. Throughout every school in Europe all pupils had to memorize the Aristotelian logic of formal and abstract rules in order to recognize valid or invalid syllogisms.

Education founded on an Aristotelian curriculum – a most prominent social marker in seventeenth-century England – was in Descartes’ view based on erroneous principles and its emphasis not placed on certainty but plausibility.

Nor have I ever observed that any previously unknown truth has been discovered by means of disputations in the schools. For so long as each side strives for victory, more effort is put into establishing plausibility than in weighing reasons for and against; and those who have long been good advocates do not necessarily go on to make better judges. (*Discourse*, p. 24)

⁶³ John Cottingham (1998), *Descartes*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, Introduction, p. 2.

This kind of education, Descartes maintained, turned into a disadvantage. It corrupted clear understanding – the path to truth – by preventing the activation of the individual’s rational abilities. This meant, too, that to be unlearned was therefore of some advantage, as the mind had not yet been adapted to a culture of disputation and erroneous principles. Descartes explained that individual rationality had some degree of reliability even if unlearned: “When this light operates on its own, it is less liable to go wrong than when it anxiously strives to follow the numerous different rules, the inventions of human ingenuity and idleness, which serve more to corrupt it than render it more perfect” (*Discourse*, p. 17). Descartes even goes on to say that he was also addressing individuals who had, indeed, not taken part in formal education.

Those who have the strongest reasoning faculties, and who best digest their thoughts, to render them the more clear and intelligible, may always the better persuade what they propose, although they should speak but a corrupt dialect, and had never learnt Rhetorick. (*Discourse*, p. 11)

Descartes not only argued that all individuals possess rationality but had also shown that formal education was of little use in gaining certainty.

Richard Blome further advocates the concept of natural reason in the introduction to his translation of Antoine Le Grand’s popularisation of Cartesianism *An entire Body of Philosophy, According to the Principles of the Famous Renate Des Cartes*, demanding that philosophy should be open to all.⁶⁴ In this work, published in 1694, he wrote that “The *Travel* into PHILOSOPHY and true *Wisdom*, like the *Commerce* into the Rich *Indies*, should be declared *Free*, and of equal *Right* to all the

⁶⁴ Antoine Le Grand (1694), *An entire Body of Philosophy, According to the Principles of the Famous Renate Des Cartes, In three Books. Written originally in Latin by the Learned Anthony Le Grand. Now carefully Translated from the last Corrections, Alterations, and large Additions of the Author, never yet Published*. See the originals: Antoine Le Grand (1671), *Philosophia Veterum e Mente Renati Descartes. More Scholastico breviter Digesta*, London: Printed by J. Martyn; Antoine Le Grand (1672 & 1675), *Institutio philosophiae secundum principia D. Renati Descartes: Nova Methodo Adornata, & Explicata. In Usum Juventutis Academicæ*, London: Printed by J. Martyn; Antoine Le Grand (1680), *Institutio philosophiae secundum principia D. Renati Descartes: Nova Methodo Adornata, & Explicata. In Usum Juventutis Academicæ*, London: Printed by C. Clark (Mary Clarke), Impensis J. Martyn.

Subjects of England, without incurring the *Premunire of Interlopers*.⁶⁵ As women had been largely excluded from formal education, Descartes' rejection of the Aristotelian curriculum and the positioning of the individual's rationality against it, must have almost sounded to them like an invitation.

Still, at the time, all learned publications were printed either in Latin, Greek or Hebrew, the language of the learned community. Language was therefore a major issue for Descartes. His first and most widely-known published work *Discours de la Methode* (1637), where he introduced his life-long project of finding a scientific method with which to gain certainty, was originally written in French. The *Discours* was translated into English in 1649. This translation was certainly not necessary for the English gentleman who was perfectly able to understand French as a result of the extensive formal education he enjoyed; rather, it was published to broaden the readership to include those of lesser education. Descartes' *The Principles of Philosophy* (originally published in 1644 as *Principia Philosophiae*) was originally written in Latin as he had hoped for support from school and university authorities in replacing Aristotle with his own philosophy. However, he also had a translation produced in the vernacular. Descartes' letter to the translator which was printed as the introduction, underscores his desire to integrate a less-learned readership: "The only apprehension I entertain is lest the title should deter some who have not been brought up to letters" (*Principles*, p. 2).

In the introduction to his translation of Le Grand, Blome, too, criticised that language represented an extremely difficult barrier to overcome in learning. Blome even specifically addressed women, whose enlightenment had been a key motivation in the production of his translation.

[F]or we thus make Learning an absolute Mahometan Mosque, whilst the whole Fair Sex are at once excluded from any part of their Devotion in it. And let me tell you, the most complaisant French Authors generally Print their Philosophical Books in their own Language, by which the French Ladies, to the Glory of their Sex, have arrived to a great perfection of Knowledge, in which extraordinary Accomplishments,

⁶⁵ Antoine Le Grand (1694), *An entire Body of Philosophy*, in part: "The Epistle to the Reader" (no pagination).

being able to discourse of the Heavens, The Motion of the Planets, and the Nature and Causes of Mundane Things, &c.⁶⁶

This call for more general access to learned culture was eagerly heard by many a man and woman alike.

While Descartes had placed his own philosophy in opposition to the established Aristotelian curriculum, however, he did not reject the general idea of education; rather, he must be seen as a reformer of the concept of education. His aim was to establish a new formal education rooted in his own philosophy in which knowledge was grounded in the individual alone, leading to certainty and away from the conflicting practice of disputation. Daniel Garber has defined Descartes' contribution as follows:

Descartes opposed himself not only to the content of the philosophy of the schools, but to their very conception of what knowledge is and how it is to be transmitted. Connected with the new Cartesian philosophy is a genuine philosophy of education, a conception of the aims and goals of education very different than the one that dominated the school where Descartes himself had been educated as a youth.⁶⁷

Yet, the mere existence of rational abilities was for Descartes no guarantee that they would be used correctly. He emphasised, instead, the need to guide and cultivate those abilities through the criteria of certainty, allowing only those ideas to be accepted as true which are clearly and distinctly perceived. This process of reasoning had to be repeated constantly in order to be perfected and give access to the divine source of truth directly:

[T]hat which pleas'd me most in this Method was the assurance I had, wholly to use my reason, if not perfectly, at least as much as it was in my power; besides this, I perceived in the practice of it, my mind by little

⁶⁶ Antoine Le Grand (1694), *An entire Body of Philosophy*, in part: Epistle to the Reader, (no pagination).

⁶⁷ Daniel Garber (1998), „Descartes, or the Cultivation of the Intellect“, aus: Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (ed.) (1998), *Philosophers on Education*, London: Routledge, pp. 124-137, in this case p. 124.

and little accustom'd it self to conceive its objects more clearly and distinctly; (*Discourse*, p. 34)

This was a welcomed argument to be claimed by and for women who traditionally had been excluded from formal education. By guiding their *ratio* with Descartes' principles, not only certainty was promised but also intellectual independence from established learning and learned authorities, since they carried the primary source of knowledge already within.

Descartes' rejection of the Aristotelian curriculum in favour of a cognition guided by innate rationality was taken up by a number of women. Those who dared to step into the public with their learnedness especially valued its underlying logic. Cavendish, for instance, took over this rhetoric in stating that "natural reason is a better tutor then [sic!] education"⁶⁸ which legitimated her interest in natural philosophy – normally restricted to those male contemporaries with a formal education. Though her education was rudimentary, she pursued the study of natural philosophy, if with great difficulty. She nevertheless felt entitled to take part in intellectual culture as she believed herself to be prepared for it through her possession of rationality: "[F]or natural reason produceth beneficial effects, and findes out the right and the truth, the wrong and the falshood of things, or causes; but to conclude, what education hath not instructed me, natural Reason hath informed me of many things".⁶⁹

Lady Mary Chudleigh (1656–1710) argued that the rational abilities of women should not be ignored but be cultivated by being conducted only to clear and distinct ideas. Chudleigh had already been known through her first published work *The Ladies defence*⁷⁰ (1701), which was a refutation to the marriage sermon of John Sprint *The Bride Woman's Counsellor* (1699) and opened with the words "wife and servant are the same."⁷¹ With her *Essays upon Several Subjects in Prose and*

⁶⁸ Margaret Cavendish (1655), *The Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, in part: *To the Reader*, no pagination.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Lady Mary Chudleigh (1701), *The Ladies Defence: or, The Bride-Woman's Counsellor Answer'd*, London: John Deeve. See also: Margaret J.M. Ezell (ed.) (1993), *The Poems and Prose of Mary, Lady Chudleigh*. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, part: *The Ladies Defence: Or, The Bride-Woman's Counsellor Answer'd*, pp. 3-15.

⁷¹ John Sprint (1699), *The Bride Woman's Counsellor*, London: no printer named.

Verse,⁷² she offered a strategy to her female readership to cultivate their rationality: “‘Tis only to the Ladies I presume to present them ... they’ll in’em be perswaded to cultivate their Minds, to brighten and refine their Reason, and to render all their Passions subservient to its Dictates.”⁷³ Her popularised adaptation of Cartesianism was written for the sake of women themselves.⁷⁴ Chudleigh was aiming at the well being of her female contemporaries with her advice on the “pleasures of the mind.”⁷⁵ It offered intellectual independence from a culture which assigned women an inferior position because of its view of them as irrational.

Chudleigh’s proposition was remarkable when compared with other publications on the subject, which demanded change for women but with specific ends in mind. The argument that the rationality of women should be cultivated was, for instance, often tied to moral and religious arguments. If girls and women were not granted a formal education and their rationality neglected, the consequences for society would be negative and far reaching. Anna Maria van Schurman understood learning and especially philosophy as a guide to gain right reason, leading subsequently to a virtuous life:

[S]ound Philosophy is as a hedge and fence (to use the words of *Clemens Alexandrinus*) of the *Lords Vineyard*, or of our Saviours Doctrine: Or, being compared with the Gospel, it is (in Saint *Basil’s* similitude) like the *leaves* which are an *Ornament and Muniment* to the fruit. Indeed by right reason, that corrupt and false reason, upon which heresies mainly depend, may most easily be refuted. (*The Learned Maid*, p. 17)

⁷² Lady Mary Chudleigh (1710), *Essays upon Several Subjects in Prose and Verse*, London: R. Bonwick. See also Margaret J.M. Ezell (ed.) (1993), *The Poems and Prose of Mary, Lady Chudleigh*.

⁷³ Lady Mary Chudleigh (1710), *Essays upon Several Subjects*, (no pagination).

⁷⁴ Eileen O’Neill (1999), “Women Cartesians, “Feminine Philosophy,” and Historical Exclusion”, in: Susan Bordo (ed.) (1999), *Feminist Interpretations of René Descartes*, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, pp. 232-257.

⁷⁵ Lady Mary Chudleigh (1710), *Essays upon Several Subjects*, in part: To the Reader (no pagination).

Descartes had given a matrix for such an argument in his *Principles* saying that the right guidance and use of reason would make an individual “just, courageous, temperate, and possesse[s] all the other virtues.”⁷⁶

Leading a virtuous life was always understood as following sound religious practice. In addition, there was the belief that religion was to be approached on rational grounds as the best way to avoid vice and heresy. Anna Maria von Schurman wrote in her *Disertatio Logica* “to a Christian woman agrees the study, or assiduous (13) and serious Meditation of Gods Word, the knowledge of God, and contemplation of his most beautifull works, as being of most concernment to all Christian whatsoever.”⁷⁷ Astell described the retirement she planned to educate women and its effects in that it will “awaken our sleeping Powers and make use of that reason which GOD has given us ... By this means we are fitted to receive the influences of the holy Spirit and are (34) put in a due frame for Devotion.”⁷⁸ In this perspective religion was not simply to be followed but needed to be understood on rational basis in order to be practiced correctly.

Descartes’ rejection of the Aristotelian based curriculum in combination with his postulate of equal rational abilities helped English wealthy and literate women to gain some degree of intellectual independence from a culture that denied their rational potential. It further stimulated English women toward self-guided participation in learning. As Erica Harth put it in these striking words: “For educated, upper-class women, his philosophy was like a university without walls.”⁷⁹

⁷⁶ René Descartes, *The Principles of Philosophy*, Kessinger Publishing, p. 14.

⁷⁷ Anna Maria van Schurman (1659), *The learned Maid*, p.12-13.

⁷⁸ Mary Astell (1694), *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, London: Wilkin, p. 33.

⁷⁹ Erica Harth (1992), *Cartesian Women. Versions and Subversions of Rational Discourse in the Old Regime*. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, p. 3.

2.6. Descartes' universal doubt

In his search for certainty, Descartes argued that no unified truth had yet been found and that “plurality of voices is a proof of no validity” (*Discourse*, p. 26). He therefore came to the conclusion that “it’s much more Custom and Example which persuades us, than any assured knowledg [sic!];” In order to find certainty he introduced the philosophical practice of *universal doubt* with the rule

[N]ever to receive any thing for true, but what I evidently knew to be so; that’s to say, Carefully to avoid Precipitation and Prevention [30], and to admit nothing more into my judgement, but what could so clearly and distinctly present it self to my minde, that I could have no reason to doubt of it. (*Discourse*, p. 29-30).

Instead of simply following what was generally believed true for whatever reason (tradition or custom), Descartes decided for himself to radically doubt everything until proven otherwise in order to find reliable truth.

I learn’d to believe nothing too firmly, of what had been onely persuaded me by example or by custom, and so by little and little I freed my self from many errors, which might eclipse our naturall (17) light, and render us lesse able to comprehend reason. (*Discourse*, p. 16-17).

With this strategy he found the first clear and distinct object he accepted as “true”. The well known sentence reads: “*I think therefore I am*” (*Discourse*, p. 53). Thus his conclusion was: “That those things which we conceive clearly and distinctly, are all true” (*Discourse*, p. 53).

Descartes introduced his strategy in order to scrutinize the custom to accept what had been established as truth, especially in natural philosophy and the educational curriculum in general. But tradition and custom also existed as social practices and were followed equally unquestioned – gender hierarchies and the specific gender identity of women were no exception. When looking at the social realities of seventeenth-century English women, it is clear that Descartes had delivered a powerful tool with his universal doubt to call into question the limited

position of women in society. It inspired a range of social challenges ranging from questioning the assumption that women were irrational to questioning their position in society, to arguing for women's inclusion in education and, indeed, to posing the question of their purpose in life.

Margaret Cavendish, who knew Descartes' arguments well, adapted his strategy of doubt. She unveiled the superiority of men to women as sheer tradition, producing a social order that had yet gone unquestioned. She scrutinized this custom in the same manner Descartes had done, to produce a purer notion of truth. According to the Duchess, custom or opinion were a social force, organising society:

[T]hus by an opinion, which I hope is but an erroneous one in men, we are shut out of all power, and Authority by reason we are never employed either in civil nor marshall affaires, our counsels are despised, and laughed at, the best of our actions are troden down with scorn, by the over-wearing conceit men have of themselves and through a dispisement of us.⁸⁰

Cavendish, however, further maintained that her own gender was equally responsible for perpetuating the belief that women were irrational and outlined the consequences of this behaviour.

[A]nd we out of a custom of defectedsnesse think so too, which makes us quit all industry towards profitable knowledge being employed onely in love and pettie employments, which takes away not onely our abilities towards arts, but higher capacities in speculations.⁸¹

Poullain de la Barre argued that the male assumption that the sexes were unequal was only erroneous custom: "Of all prejudices, there is not any to be observed, more proper for this designe, than that which men commonly conceive of the inequality of the two Sexes."⁸² He adapted Descartes' universal doubt explicitly in his argument on the social hierarchies of the sexes:

⁸⁰ Margaret Cavendish (1655), *The Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, part: To the Two Universities).

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Poullain de la Barre (1677), *The woman as good as the Man*, the quote is from *The Preface*, (no pagination).

After having tryed this opinion [inequality of the sexes], according to the Rule of Verity, which is to admit of nothing for truth, but what is supported by clear, and distinct Notions; On the one hand it hath appeared false, and grounded on a prejudice, and Popular tradition; and on the other we have found that both Sexes are equal; that is to say, that women are as noble, as perfect, and as capable as men. This cannot be established, but by refuting two sorts of adversaries; the vulgar, and almost all the learned.⁸³

Anna Maria van Schurman adapted Cartesian universal doubt in her debate with her close friend Dr. Rivet, Professor of Theology at Leyden. Rivet wrote to Schurman that ordinary women are prohibited from equality with men by “sacred Laws of Nature”, she protested and argued in the best Cartesian manner that his view was based on custom and not on reason.⁸⁴

Bathsua Makin argued in her introduction against the force of custom, which she maintained was almost as powerful as Nature:

Custom, when it is inveterate, hath a mighty influence, it hath the force of Nature it self. The Barbarous custom to breed Women low, is grown general amongst us, and hath prevailed so far, that it is verily believed (especially amongst a sort of debauched Sots) that Women are not endued with such Reason, as Men; nor capable of improvement by Education, as they are.⁸⁵

An anonymous publication with the title *The Wonders of the female World, or a General History of Women* (1683) argued strongly against the submission of women under men and unveiled this hierarchy as a man-made custom.

By which unworthy partial means they [women] are forced to submit to Men, not out of natural or Divine Reason, but onely by Prevalency of Custome, Education, or some Tyrannical occasion Although it's

⁸³ Poullain de la Barre (1677), *The woman as good as the Man*, in part *The preface*, (no pagination).

⁸⁴ See Myra Reynolds (1920), *The Learned Lady in England (1650-1760)*, p. 273.

⁸⁵ Bathsua Makin (1673), *An Essay to Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen*, in part: Dedication (no pagination).

evident, that Man oweth the Half of his Life and his whole Love to Woman, yet Custome spreading like an Epidemick Contagion, hath made it common to undervalue this Sex, & bespatter them with opprobrious Language.⁸⁶

Mary Astell, too, drew on this notion in her arguments on the female exclusion from formal education and in outlining its consequences condemned it as motivated by custom: „‘Tis Custom therefore, that Tyrant Custom, which is the grand motive to all those irrational choices which we daily see made in the World, so very contrary to our *present* interest and pleasure, as well as to our Future”.⁸⁷ For Astell, custom was responsible for keeping women in a petty state of irrationality by excluding them from learning. The fact that only men had access to formal education was, she asserted, merely a cultural agreement. She even dared to argue that if men were restrained to the same educational limitations to which women were subjected, they would do much worse:

Were the Men as much neglected, and as little care taken to cultivate and improve them, perhaps they wou’d be so far from surpassing those whom they now dispise, that they themselves wou’d sink into the greatest stupidity and brutality.⁸⁸

Astell went on to suggest that custom, as what we would call today a social construction, can itself be made anew. She sought to diminish the negative consequences of women’s exclusion from education, for the custom of keeping upper-class women in leisure and, hence, irrational seemed a dangerous thing indeed: “Thus Ignorance and a narrow Education lay the Foundation of Vice, and Imitation and Custom rear it up. Custom, that merciless torrent that carries all before.”⁸⁹

Many other publications whose objective it was to change the social realities of seventeenth-century English women did not explicitly employ Cartesian language. Yet despite the lack of specific terminology, the arguments of these texts are founded

⁸⁶ Anonymous (1683), *The Wonders of the female World, or a General History of Women*. London: Pried [sic!] by J.H. for Thomas Mathus., p. 203.

⁸⁷ Mary Astell (1694), *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, London: Wilkin, p. 15.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 9.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 14.

upon the underlying assumption that custom and tradition are not based on “right principles” and can therefore be changed. One such text, a work anonymously published in 1678, not only encouraged women to assume more challenging tasks in the home but viewed their abilities from an alternative perspective, as the (laborious) title itself reveals: *Advice to the Women and Maidens of London. Shewing that, instead of their usual Pastime, and Education in Needle-work, Lace and Pointmaking, it were far more Necessary and Profitable to apply themselves to the right Understanding and Practice of keeping books of account: whereby either single or married they may know their Estates, and carry on their Trades; and avoid the Danger of a helpless and forlorn Condition; incident in Widows.*

The anonymous female author not only proposed that her female readership take over a masculine skill, but simultaneously bolstered their spirits to do so, explaining that she had done so herself and it had not demanded too much of her:

That having in some measure practised both Needle-work and Accounts I can averr, that I never found this Masculine Art harder or more difficult then the effeminate achievements of Lace-making, gum-work or the like, the attainment whereof need not make us proud: And God forbid that the practice of an useful Virtue should prompt us to a contrary Vice.

Through her comparison of the practice of feminine to masculine arts, she concludes that there is no vice in women taking over masculine skills if they are “useful virtues”. Again, here, we see the underlying Cartesian notion that custom has assigned these skills to the masculine realm that women, though perfectly capable of such reasonable activity, have been kept from them out of tradition.

2.7. Descartes made English women *think*

Descartes' philosophy offered the individual self-assurance in his (her) rational abilities. G.A.J. Rogers values this Cartesian influence accordingly: "What Descartes did to the English was perhaps the most important thing that a philosopher can do, he made them think."⁹⁰ Charlotte Ware, too, points out: "Perhaps Descartes' greatest contribution to philosophy was his interest in the self rather than in the objective world known by the self, his 'Copernican revolution' in thought."⁹¹ I would like to extend these statements to English contemporary women and claim that Descartes' philosophy had an enormous effect in his time by making English women *think*. They had certainly thought before, but bolstered by Descartes' philosophy and its justification for their active engagement in social life, women too became involved in an intellectual culture from which they had heretofore been excluded.

As we have seen, numerous publications of the period evidence the reception of Descartes' ideas on behalf of English women. Those English women who had access to the relevant ideas of Cartesianism experienced a very unique process of empowerment. It justified their rational abilities and authorised women to employ them. Thus, the quality of rational production did not depend on gender but on the correct use of the rational abilities. As we have seen, too, Descartes' rejection of the Aristotelian curriculum devalued the learning from which women had been excluded and fostered the notion of independent, individual learning. What held sway was not formal education but the right guidance of the rational abilities alone. Gender hierarchies, in general, were scrutinised with the tools Descartes' philosophy supplied with the method of universal doubt. These Cartesian tools allowed English women to argue for their status as rational beings and, subsequently, for their inclusion into a (reformed) formal education, the discourses of philosophy and politics, as well as an entire range of social issues. Women began to criticise their

⁹⁰ G.A.J. Rogers (1985), "Descartes and the English", in: J. D. North / J. J. Roche (eds.), *The Light of Nature. Essays in the History and Philosophy of Science presented to A.C. Crombie*.

⁹¹ Charlotte S. Ware (1950), "The Influence of Descartes on John Locke. A Bibliographical Study" in: *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, vol. IV, p. 210-230.

inferior status, at the time upheld as part of a natural hierarchy, as a social construction which could as well be changed and re-constructed to their benefit.⁹²

We have heard, here, only those voices which claimed such territory for women publicly. In many other cases, the diverse use of Cartesian tools for the empowerment of women was not a public act but a quiet strategy. As the work of Judith Drake suggests, more female supporters of this thinking existed than are visible today:

For my own part I shall readily own, that as few as there are, there may be and are abundance, who in their Conversations approve themselves much more able, and sufficient Assertors of our Cause, than my self; and I am sorry that either their Business, their other Diversions, or too great Indulgence of their Ease, hinder them from doing publick Justice to their Sex.⁹³

It is no surprise that almost all female authors who claimed intellectual independence on the basis of Cartesian arguments were of aristocratic or wealthy origin. But such strategy was indeed also addressed to lower social ranks, as can be seen in the publication of Hannah Wooley, who gave exact rules to *Cook-maids, Dairy-maids, Chamber-maids, and all others that go to Service* in her *A Guide to Ladies, Gentlewomen and Maids*.⁹⁴ I would like, now, to turn to a detailed examination of two English women who claimed intellectual independence for themselves and their English contemporaries, Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, and Mary Astell, in an effort to show just how widely disseminated the ideas of Cartesianism were among women.

⁹² Yet this was a pre-enlightenment argument which would only eventually develop into the claim of an equality of the genders.

⁹³ Judith Drake (1694), *An Essay in the Defence of the female Sex*, p. 2-3.

⁹⁴ Hanna Woolley (1688), *A Guide to Ladies, Gentlewomen and Maids: Containing Directions of Behaviour, in all Places, Companies, Relations, and Conditions, from their Childhood down to Old Age*, London: Printed for Dorman Newman at the Chyrurgions Arms in Little-Britain neer the Hospital-gate, and Witt Whiwood at the golden Lyon in Duck lane.

3. **“As if we had not rational souls as well as men” - Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle’s use of Cartesianism**

Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, (1623–1673) was an exceptional woman.¹ Despite her modest formal education she pursued an interest in natural philosophy,² which began in early childhood and lasted throughout her life. She

¹ On Margaret Cavendish see Anna Batigelli (1998), “Political thought / political action: Margaret Cavendish’s Hobbesian dilemma”, in: Hilda L. Smith (ed.), *Women writers and the early modern British political tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 40-55; Anna Batigelli (1998), *Margaret Cavendish and the Exiles of the Mind*, Lexington: University Press of Kentucky; Sophia B. Blaydes (1988), “Nature is a Woman: The Duchess of Newcastle and seventeenth century philosophy”, in: Donald C. Mell Jr. / Theodore E. D. Braun / Lucia M. Palmer (eds.), *Man, God, and Nature in the Enlightenment*, Woodbridge: Colleagues Press, pp. 51-64; Jean Gagen (1959), “Honor and fame in the works of the Duchess of Newcastle”, in: *Studies in Philology*, (July 1959), vol. 56, no. 3, North Carolina: North Carolina University Press, pp. 519-538; Douglas Grant (1957), *Margaret the First. A Biography of Margaret Cavendish Duchess of Newcastle 1623-1673*, London: Rupert Hart-Davis; Francis Harris (1997), “Living in the Neighbourhood of science: Mary Evelyn, Margaret Cavendish and the Greshamites”, in: Lynette Hunter / Sarah Hutton (eds.), *Women, Science and Medicine 1500–1700*, Thrupp: Sutton Publishing, pp. 198- 217; Sarah Hutton (1997), “In Dialogue with Thomas Hobbes: Margaret Cavendish’s natural Philosophy”, in: *Women’s Writing*, vol. 4, no. 3, pp. 421-432; Sarah Hutton (1997), “Anne Conway, Margaret Cavendish and seventeenth century scientific thought”, in: Lynette Hunter / Sarah Hutton (eds.), *Women, Science and Medicine 1500-1700*, pp. 218-234; Kathleen Jones (1988), *A glorious Fame: The Life of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, 1623-1673*, London: Bloomsbury; Sara Mendelson Heller (1987), *The mental world of Stuart Women. Three Studies*, Brighton: The Harvester Press; Gerald Dennis Meyer (1955), “The scientific Lady in England 1650-1760”, in: *English Studies*, vol. 12, Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, pp. 1-123; Samuel I. Mintz (1952), “The Duchess of Newcastle’s visit to the Royal Society”, in: *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, (April), pp.168-176; Verena Olejniczak Lobsien (1999), *Skeptische Phantasie. Eine andere Geschichte der frühneuzeitlichen Literatur*, München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag; Jacqueline Pearson (1985), “‘Women may discourse ... as well as men’: Speaking and Silent Women in the Plays of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle”, in: *Tulsa Studies of Women’s Literature*, (Spring) vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 33- 45; Bronwen Price (1996), “Feminine modes of knowing and scientific enquiry: Margaret Cavendish’s poetry as case study”, in: Helen Wilcox (ed.), *Women and Literature in Britain 1500-1700*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 117-139; Emma L. Rees (2003), *Margaret Cavendish: gender, genre, exile*, Manchester: Manchester University Press; Lisa T. Sarasohn (1984), “A Science Turned Upside Down: Feminism and the Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish”, in: *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, (Autumn), vol. 47, no. 4, pp. 289-307; Elisabeth Wilhelmine Strauß (1999), *Die Arithmetik der Leidenschaften: Margaret Cavendishs Naturphilosophie*, Stuttgart & Weimar: Metzler.

² I prefer the seventeenth-century term ‘natural philosophy’ to ‘science’, as the latter did not yet have its modern meaning.

published fourteen volumes of biography, autobiography, drama, poetry, fictional epistolary correspondence, romance, and natural philosophy at a time when women were actively discouraged to do so.³ Her publishing activity was unprecedented in its volume and subject matter, making her a trespasser into territory reserved exclusively for men. Cavendish was one of the first English women who wrote specifically for publication and released her books under her own name.⁴ My goal in this chapter is to examine the important role Cartesianism played for Cavendish in achieving her extraordinary written output – something which lay beyond gender boundaries for even high aristocratic women of the seventeenth-century. But Cavendish did not only use Cartesianism for her own purposes, she made it work in the interest of women in general and thereby became one of the first female voices to publicly claim women's rights.

Cavendish had, in fact, been one of the few exceptional women who enjoyed access to René Descartes' theories while they were still under discussion in exclusively elite circles.⁵ This historical context has been frequently overlooked and

³ From 1655 through 1671 Margaret Cavendish wrote fourteen books which she published in twenty-four separate editions: *Poems and Fancies* (London, 1653, 1664, 1668); *Philosophical Fancies* (London, 1653); *The World's Olio* (London, 1655, 1671); *The Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (London, 1655, 1663); *Nature's Pictures* (London, 1656, 1671); *Playes* (London, 1662); *Orations of Divers Sorts* (London, 1662, 1662, 1663, 1668); *Philosophical Letters* (London, 1664); *CCXI Sociable Letters* (London, 1664); *The Description of a New World* (London, 1666, 1668); *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (London, 1666, 1668); *The Life of ... William Cavendish* (London, 1667); *Grounds of Natural Philosophy* (London, 1668); *Plays, never before Printed* (London, 1668). More than half of her works reappeared as second or even third editions.

⁴ Mary Wroth was another woman who had dared to publish *The Countesse of Montgomeries Urania* already in 1621. According to James Fitzmaurice, Cavendish "was not the first woman to have a book of poems in English appear in print, for the verses of the American Anne Bradstreet were published at the behest of someone other than the author a little before *Poems and Fancies* appeared in 1653. Cavendish was, however, the first woman to openly admit that she sought publication, and she was the first to publish a great deal, some thirteen books in a score of editions." In: Jame Fitzmaurice (1997) edited Cavendish's *Sociable Letters*, New York & London: Garland Publishing.

⁵ Anne Conway was another woman who studied Descartes' theories at an early stage. She corresponded with Henry More about philosophical matters and Cartesianism. It is her critical distance to Descartes' thinking, which is at the centre of her work *The Principles of the most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*. Conway did not share Cavendish's urge for fame and thought it impossible to publish as a woman.

Cavendish rarely regarded as an expert on natural philosophy. Douglas Grant, for instance, writes in his biography of Margaret Cavendish that Cartesianism was beyond her intellectual reach.⁶ Cavendish's knowledge of Cartesianism, moreover, is a matter of intense debate in secondary literature. She was seen by some as pro-Cartesian. Gerald Meyer, for example, describes Cavendish as "mildly mad and immoderately devoted to Cartesian rationalism."⁷ Others, far outnumbering the former, place emphasis on Cavendish's anti-Cartesian arguments. Feminist theorists have often taken up this position, aligning Cavendish with an anti-patriarchal stance.⁸ Lisa T. Sarasohn, for instance, regards Cavendish's philosophy as "significant in what it reveals about the female, or at least one female, attitude to nature and cosmology."⁹ A rare exception is Sarah Hutton's essay on Cavendish's knowledge of and alignment with Hobbesian theories, pointing to the mechanist foundation of Cavendish's scientific theories.¹⁰

A close examination of Cavendish's texts regarding her stance on Cartesianism makes it clear that no consistently pro- or anti-Cartesian position can be ascribed to her. While Cavendish shared, for instance, Descartes' position on materiality, she argued equally against his body-mind split. Yet, she used a Cartesian notion of mind to demand an education for women. This strategic appropriation of certain of Descartes' ideas suggests the intensity of Cavendish's knowledge of his theories. Her thorough understanding of Cartesianism enabled Cavendish to apply it persuasively and eclectically. Ambiguities arising from Cavendish's simultaneous appropriation and rejection of Cartesian ideas should reflect her ability for independent intellectual thought rather than be put down to shoddy scholarship, as

For those reasons, her work was published posthumously. Anne Conway (1692), *The Principles of the most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, London: Printed by M. Brown.

⁶ Douglas Grant (1957), *Margaret the First*, p. 201.

⁷ Gerald Meyer (1955), "The scientific Lady in England 1650-1760", p. 2.

⁸ See for example Jacqueline Broad (2002), *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Carolyn Merchant (1989), *Death of Nature. Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, and Genevieve Lloyd (1984), *The Man of Reason. 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy*. London: Routledge.

⁹ Sarasohn argues on the other hand that Cavendish adapted scepticism because she was as a woman not allowed to produce a unique notion of "truth" with her natural philosophy. See Lisa T. Sarasohn (1984), "A Science Turned Upside Down", pp. 297.

¹⁰ Sarah Hutton (1999), "In Dialogue with Thomas Hobbes".

some have argued. My interest, here, is to examine the ways in which Cavendish modified and assimilated aspects of Descartes' work, integrating certain theories within her own thought with specific objectives for herself and her sex.

Before proceeding with my analysis of Cavendish's work, I would like to comment briefly on the quality of her texts, which – as most readers acknowledge – are sometimes not easily accessible.¹¹ Her writing often suffers from lack of structure; so much so, indeed, that it occasionally appears to contradict itself. This feature of her texts is not easily accounted for, yet I propose that such ambiguities be read as part of a rhetorical device Cavendish felt obliged to adopt in order to pursue her 'unwomanly' interests in 'male' discourses. Her life was defined by the struggle to unify two diametrically opposed positions: that of obedient wife, living in perfect harmony with female decorum, and that of philosopher, transgressing gender boundaries to claim rationality for herself and her female contemporaries. Radically, Cavendish managed to play both roles with considerable success. Jacqueline Pearson has already given a sensitive explanation for the occurrence of such ambiguities in Cavendish's plays. Pearson addresses these complexities as a general difficulty of seventeenth-century women with regard to the specific expectations of their sex and the development of a female position of *self* diverging from them.¹² I would like to extend Pearson's explanation to the entire corpus of Cavendish's work. Ambiguity was not only an inherent structure of her texts, but a major constitutional element of her "performance", to borrow the contemporary term. Her ability to juggle the positions of submissive wife, bashful and modest, and scientific *virtuosa*, claiming acknowledgment for her intellectual productions, ensured that she challenged the restrictions of her sex without ever fully losing broader social acceptance.

¹¹ See for instance James Fitzmaurice: "Her [Cavendish's] scientific thought provides puzzles for those who study early natural philosophy." In: James Fitzmaurice / Josephine A. Roberts, et al. (ed.) (1997), *Major Women Writers of Seventeenth-Century England*, Michigan: Michigan University Press, p. 151. See further Lisa T. Sarasohn (1984), "A Science Turned Upside Down", p. 290, and Sarah Hutton (1997), "In Dialogue with Thomas Hobbes", p. 421.

¹² See Jacqueline Pearson (1985), "'Women may discourse ... as well as men'".

3.1. The Duchess as philosopher

In light of the severely limited educational opportunities open to seventeenth-century women, the fact that Margaret Cavendish was one of the first English citizens to learn of Descartes' theories is more than surprising. Like the majority of contemporary women of her status, Cavendish was home educated in preparation for her future tasks as wife and mother. Her frequent complaints regarding the standard of her education, however, underscore her awareness of its insufficiency. Given these circumstances, the question arises, then, how did Cavendish gain familiarity with the writing of Descartes?

Cavendish was born as Margaret Lucas, the fourth child of a family of lesser gentry. Her education was basic: she was barely instructed to read and to write, since her mother placed greater emphasis on the development of her social skills. But Cavendish nevertheless read as a child, according to her own account: "as for my studie of books it was little, yet I chose rather to read, than to imploy my time in any other work, or practice" (*Natures Pictures*, p. 384). Already in her early years, she developed an interest in intellectual culture and spent time in contemplation: "for I being addicted from my childhood, to contemplation rather than conversation, to solitariness rather than society, to melancholy rather than mirth, to write with the pen than to work with a needle, passing my time with harmeless fancies" (*Natures Pictures*, p. 384). Before she turned twelve, she had produced sixteen baby-books, as she confessed in *Sociable Letters*.¹³ It appears that already in her youth she embarked upon activities for which her female education had not prepared her. When not understanding the "names and tearms of art" or the "opinions of the Antients" (*The Philosophical and Physical Opinions*), she was assisted by her well educated brothers: "and when I read what I understood not, I would ask my brother the Lord Lucas, he being learned, the sense or meaning thereof" (*Natures Pictures*, p. 387).

Still, her orthographic knowledge was poor and she had little facility in understanding foreign languages. This indeed turned out to be problematic when Margaret Lucas – the daughter of a Royalist family – joined Queen Henrietta Maria, who fled to Paris from a Civil War that shook England in 1642. Initially, Margaret

¹³ Edited and introduced by James Fitzmaurice (1997).

resisted the idea of exile, but her mother forbade her return. It was not until she made the acquaintance of William Cavendish, Marquis of Newcastle and her future husband, that her attitude towards the French Court changed. William Cavendish was one of many English Royalists who had made France their temporary home. Many years older than his second wife, Margaret, he encouraged her unusual interest in natural philosophy, a passion he shared. However, he not only encouraged her to pursue intellectual activities but also supported the publication of her writing under her own name – though few women at this time had actually dared to publish.¹⁴ As Dorothy Osborne's comment about Cavendish to her future husband, William Temple, illustrates, the publication of books by women was utterly unheard of: "ridiculous ... to venture at writeing [sic!] book's and in verse too".¹⁵

William had an amateur interest in natural philosophy. His chief gentlemanly occupation was the art of breeding and handling horses, through which he had won considerable international fame. His brother Charles was most learned especially in mathematics. Charles was well-known for his connections in the scientific world, exchanging letters with many European intellectuals.¹⁶ This has prompted Miriam Reik to describe him as one of the seventeenth century's "Philosophical merchants".¹⁷ Anna Batigelli underscores the breadth of Charles Cavendish's intellectual interests, pointing out that in a single letter he "asks his good friend, the mathematician John Pell, for his reaction to Descartes' book on the soul (*Les Passions de L'Ame*, 1649), looks forward to reading Gassendi's book on the soul on Epicurean philosophy, asks about Hobbes, whose *Leviathan* he awaits, and reports that Sir William Davenant has "lately sent my Brother a Preface to an intended Poem [*Gondibert*] of his not yet printed" with Hobbes's additions."¹⁸ In her brother-in-law,

¹⁴ On women and their wish to publish or rather to transmit their writing in form of manuscripts see Margaret Ezell (1987), *The Patriarch's Wife. Literary Evidence and the History of the Family*, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, pp. 64-83.

¹⁵ Dorothy Osborne (1928), *The Letters from Dorothy Osborne to Sir William Temple*, edited by G.C. Moore Smith, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 37.

¹⁶ For Charles Cavendish's connections into the European scientific scene see Jean Jacqout (1952), "Sir Charles Cavendish and his Learned Friends", in: *Annals of Science*, Consisting out of two parts: vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 13-27 and vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 175-191.

¹⁷ Miriam Reik (1977), *The golden Lands of Thomas Hobbes*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

¹⁸ Anna Batigelli (1998), "Political thought/political action: Margaret Cavendish's

Margaret had not only found a close friend but also a tutor situated at the heart of elite discussions on natural philosophy - willing to let her share his knowledge and connections, as she was never tired to mention.¹⁹ She dedicated her first books *Poems and Fancies* (1653), and *Philosophical Fancies* (1653) to him.

During their French exile, William and his brother Charles Cavendish continued to pursue their interest in natural philosophy. They gathered around them a group of exiled English philosophers influenced by mechanical philosophy – Thomas Hobbes, Kenelm Digby, and Walter Charleton – and were also connected to the Continental natural philosophers – Martin Mersenne, Pierre Gassendi, Constantijn Huygens, the chemist Johannes Baptista Van Helmont and René Descartes. As part of this intellectual household with its uniquely supportive atmosphere, Margaret Cavendish had ready access to knowledge not usually deemed appropriate for a woman, even having the opportunity to meet some of the philosophers in person. She met with Descartes on at least two occasions in Paris,²⁰ though, according to her own account, she was unable to exchange ideas with him since she could speak neither French nor Latin:

[B]ut upon my conscience I never spake to monsieur De Cartes in my life, nor ever understood what he said, for he spake no English, and I understand no other language, and those times I saw him, which was twice at dinner with my Lord in Paris, he did appear to me a man of the fewest words I ever heard. (*The Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, no pagination).

Hobbesian dilemma”, pp. 47.

¹⁹ Charles Cavendish travelled with his sister-in-law back to England in times of the Interregnum to claim back taken property from Cromwell’s government. When they planned to return after one and a half years Charles stayed behind with an ague from which he died soon after, leaving Margaret and William in deep mourning.

²⁰ See also Douglas Grant (1957), *Margaret the First*, p. 94. On Cavendish’s supposed encounter with Descartes see Anne Shaver’s introduction to Margaret Cavendish’s *Convent of Pleasure and other Plays*, Anne Shaver (1999), p. 3 and also Patricia Phillips (1990), *The Scientific Lady*.

A Social History of Woman's Scientific Interest 1520-1918, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, p. 60.

Cartesianism, then widely discussed among the European elite, obviously became the topic of much conversation within the Cavendish household, as well. William and Charles Cavendish exchanged letters with Descartes, discussing his ideas in relation to their own work on optics. William further corresponded with the French philosopher on animal spirits.²¹ Though Thomas Hobbes was highly critical of Cartesianism, his views provided a further source through which the Cavendish household came to know the work of Descartes. Hobbes had been a lifelong friend to the Cavendishs, his relationship to William and Charles dates back to the late 1620s. They met again in Paris where Hobbes had been a resident since 1641. Margaret Cavendish became personally acquainted with Hobbes and also read his work *De Cive*.²² Hobbes reported his disagreements with Descartes to his English friends, about which Charles was very upset, as he maintained friendship with both men.²³ Hobbes was worried that similarities between his and Descartes' theories could lead to accusations of plagiarism for him. He thus sought support and confirmation from his

²¹ Jean Jacquot writes: "Descartes wrote to both brothers in a very deferential manner. Three letters, answering William's queries, are of special interest to us, as we find in Charles's papers evidence of similar preoccupation. In the first (April, 1645), Descartes explains the cause of animal heat, and the way animal spirits, being "the most lively and subtle parts of blood", are separated from the grossest and pass into the brain, and from there into the nerves and muscles. In the second (October, 1645), he describes the rôle of the nerves in the perception of internal (hunger, etc.) and external (colour, etc.) sensations: they connect the brain with all the parts of the body "so that when one of these parts is moved, the place in the brain where these nerves end is also moved, and its movement excites in the soul the feeling which is attributed to that part". Such remarks were not new and Descartes referred Newcastle to passages of his *Discours de la Méthode* and *Dioptrique*, but both were aware of the philosophical problem involved, namely, the relation of soul to body and the difference in their natures. In his third letter (November 23, 1646), Descartes distinguishes animals, which are mere machines, from men who, from the outside, would seem to be so, were it not that they use signs and words to deal with subjects bearing no relation to their physical needs or their passions. This disinterested manifestation of their intelligence was to him the proof that they possessed an immortal soul. In the second letter, he repeats this fundamental principle of his philosophy that God is the cause and the preserver of all the motions in the world." Jean Jacquot (1952), "Sir Charles Cavendish and his Learned Friends", in: *Annals of Science*, Consisting out of two parts: vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 13-27 and vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 175-191, in this case pp. 188.

²² See Margaret Cavendish (1655), *The Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, in part: *An Epilogue to my Philosophical Opinions*. On Cavendish's alignment with Hobbes see Sarah Hutton's excellent article (1997), "In Dialogue with Thomas Hobbes: Margaret Cavendish's natural philosophy".

²³ See Douglas Grant (1957), *Margaret the First*, p. 92, quoting out of Charles' letters to John Pell: Birch Collection, 4278, ff. 205, 241, 273, 213.

English friends that his ideas had been defined prior to Descartes having developed his theories.²⁴

Although Cavendish's first encounter with Cartesianism was likely verbal, through discussions with the male members of her family, she wrote in *The Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1655) that she had, indeed, read Descartes – if only parts of his *Passions of the Soul*, which had been published in English in 1650: “I never read more of Mounsieur Des-Cartes than half his book of passion.”²⁵ There is, however, strong evidence to suggest that Cavendish had studied Descartes' ideas long before. Already in her first work *Poems and Fancies* (1653), a Cartesian influence can be seen. She also made use of Descartes' metaphors in her studies on natural philosophy: “Wee mad should thinke those Men, if they should / That they did see a *Sound*, or tast a *Smell*,” (*Poems and Fancies*, 1653).²⁶

Not only the content but the tone and style of Cavendish's work was also greatly influenced by Descartes' *Passions of the Soul*. So much so, indeed, that Cavendish was accused of plagiarism for her first works *Poems and Fancies* (1653) and *Philosophicall Fancies* (1653), written and published while she and her brother-in-law Charles were in England reclaiming confiscated property.²⁷ Because natural

²⁴ On the conflict between Descartes and Hobbes see also Geneviève Rodis-Lewis (1998), *Descartes. His Life and Thought*, Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press. On Hobbes' worry that Descartes could claim he had stolen his ideas see Richard Tuck: “Hobbes was particularly sensitive to the possibility that Descartes might claim that Hobbes had stolen from him his basic ideas about ‘the nature and production of light and sound’, and of all ‘fantasies’ or ‘ideas’.” Richard Tuck (1988), “Hobbes and Descartes”, in: G.A.J. Rogers / Alan Ryan (eds.), *Perspectives on Thomas Hobbes*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 11-42, in this case, p. 14.

²⁵ *The Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1655), in part: *An Epiloge to my Philosophical Opinions to my Philosophical Opinions* (no pagination).

²⁶ In the course of arguing for God's existence Descartes countered his critiques with the argument: “and (me thinks) those who use their imagination to comprehend them, are just as those, who to hear sounds, or smell odours, would make use of their eyes;” (*Discourse*, p. 59).

²⁷ Plagiarism occurred quite often and some authors therefore chose to underline the originality of their thoughts. Henry More wrote in *A Collection of Several Philosophical Writings of Dr Henry More*: “And lastly, for that scruple concerning the theft or petty sacriledge of several *Plagiaries*, who, as it were, rob the Monuments of the dead to adorn the living; it is the onely thing that I can without vanity profess, that what I offer to you is properly my own, that is to say, that the invention, application and management of the Reasons and Arguments comprised in this Book, whether for confutation or confirmation, is the genuine result of my own anxious and thoughtful

philosophy was not the realm of female activity, the likelihood of these books being written entirely by Cavendish was called into question. In her next book *The Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1655), she complained bitterly about the accusations of plagiarism: "Some say that my Book of Philosophy, it seems as if I had conversed with Des-Cartes or Master Hobbes, or both, or have frequented their studies, by reading their works."²⁸

Almost ten years later when the Cavendishes had already returned to England after the Restoration of Charles II, Margaret felt sufficiently assured in her views to demonstrate her considerable knowledge of Descartes' theories. In her work *Philosophical Letters; or, modest Reflections upon some Opinions in Natural Philosophy, maintained by several Famous and Learned Authors of this Age* (1664) she critiqued René Descartes' thinking, along with the works of three other well-known philosophers of her day: Thomas Hobbes, Johannes Baptista van Helmont and Henry More. Since she had not received adequate critical response to her scientific theories from the contemporary philosophers²⁹ to whom she had presented her works, she now turned to refute many aspects of their thinking. For a woman to do so openly would have been a flagrant and inexcusable transgression, so she chose, instead, to give her book the form of a fictive epistolary exchange between two women.

Though fictive, the subversive, still female, persona of *Philosophical Letters* sent the powerful subtextual message that women had not only the ability but the right to criticise the most renowned philosophers of the day. This was so daring an act that women's right to formulate philosophical opinions becomes a thematic of the text itself, as one of the female correspondents of the epistolary exchange writes:

Mind, no old stuff purloined or borrowed from other Writers." In: Henry More (1662), *A Collection of Several Philosophical Writings of Dr Henry More*, London: Printed by James Flesher, for William Morden Book-seller in Cambridge, part *The Epistle Dedicatory* (no pagination).

²⁸ Margaret Cavendish, *The Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1655), in part: *An Epilogue to my Philosophical Opinions to my Philosophical Opinions* (no pagination).

²⁹ The only published critical responses was by S. Du Verger (1657), *Humble Reflections Upon some Passages of the Right Honorable the Lady Marchioness of Newcastle's Olio Or An Appeal from her misinformed to her own better judgment*, London.

[T]hose Worthy Authors, were they my censurers, would not deny me the same liberty they take themselves; which is, that I may dissent from their Opinions, as well as they dissent from others, and from amongst themselves" (*Philosophical Letters*, 1664, p. 1).

The rhetorical strategies employed here construct a humble female voice, which flatters the "worthy" philosophers. They are themselves so reasonable and just as not to deny her the right to speak, so the implication, merely because of her sex. This notion of the rational equality of the sexes is asserted right at the beginning of the text and underlies its entire argument. We can be fairly certain that the female literary voice critiquing the theories of the philosophical giants is Cavendish herself – the fictitious philosophical Lady not only signs her letters with the initials MA (for Margaret) but moreover recommends Cavendish's book *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* to the reader.

When examining the works of Descartes, Cavendish chooses not to look at the entire corpus of his thinking, but only at selections – an ability to make judicious selections, which, as we have seen, is indicative of Cavendish's detailed and excellent knowledge of the Descartes' entire theoretical corpus. The Lady goes on to explain:

I am reading now the works of that Famous and most Renowned *Author, Des Cartes*, out of which I intend to pick out onely those discourses which I like best, and not to examine his opinions, as they go along from the beginning to the end of his books; (*Philosophical Letters*, 1664, p. 97)

The strategy described here is representative of Cavendish's general approach to Cartesianism: she chose those elements that suited the arguments she was making. Cavendish employed a method of selective adaptation, sometimes adopting, sometimes rejecting the same ideas to suit different perspectives. Put another way: although she rejected specific ideas in one context, she was quite prepared to use them for a different argument, as we shall see later.

Cavendish's subsequent publication, *Blazing World* (1666), integrated her developed critique of Cartesianism. Here, a woman finds refuge in a paradisiacal realm and is given absolute power by the Emperor, who worships her as a goddess and makes her his wife. In search of an ideal structure for her realm, the empress turns away from the "Ancient philosophers" and "endeavour[s] to make a World according to *Des Cartes* Opinions."³⁰ But she quickly changes her mind, for

[w]hen she [the empress] had made the ethereal globules, and set them a-moving by a strong and lively imagination, her mind became so dizzy with their extraordinary swift turning round, that it almost put her into a swoon; (*Blazing World*, p. 187/188³¹)

Here, we see Cavendish's knowledge of Descartes' hypotheses concerning the formation of the earth. Peter Harrison has already shown how widely accepted Descartes' cosmology was in seventeenth-century England: "Even writers who had explicitly abandoned key elements of the Cartesian cosmology came to be regarded in some sense as his followers."³² The empress of Cavendish's *Blazing World* is quite engaged by Descartes' idea of vortexes – the organisational force of the stars – analogous to her dizziness and swoon.³³

As these examples show, the traces of Cartesianism in Cavendish's texts are evident and reflect not a one-to-one appropriation of Descartes' thinking but rather, I would argue, a thoroughgoing *intertextuality*. As Vincent Leitch formulated in 1983, following Julia Kristeva's concept of the text: "The Text is not an autonomous or

³⁰ Margaret Cavendish (1994), *The Blazing World*, Penguin Edition, edited by Kate Lilley, p. 187.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Peter Harrison (2000), "The influence of Cartesian cosmology in England", in: Stephen Gaukroger / John Schuster / John Sutton (eds.), *Descartes' Natural Philosophy*, London & New York: Routledge, pp. 168-192, in this case p. 168.

³³ Peter Harrison explains Descartes' hypothetical account of "how the cosmos might have been formed by matter and motion" in Part III of the *Principia* Descartes as: "Corpuscles of a single kind, jostling against one another, gave rise to three kinds of material; the first, the matter of the sun and stars; the second, the matter of the heavens; the third, the matter of earth, planets and comets. The heavens organised themselves into vortices with stars at their centres. The planets of our world system, originating in smaller vortices of their own, were captured along with their satellites in the vortex of the sun. The origin of the earth receives its own treatment in Part IV", in: Peter Harrison (2000), "The influence of Cartesian cosmology in England", p. 169.

unified object, but a set of relations with other texts.”³⁴ It is in this sense that Cavendish’s literary productions bear the mark of Cartesian theories. Such an understanding allows us to focus on Cavendish’s text to see her own unique approach to Cartesianism. As we saw earlier, the Duchess both affirmed and reiterated Descartes’ thinking and simultaneously rejected it. So, the question becomes, on precisely which points did she align herself with Descartes and, equally, where did she find herself at odds, compelled to voice opposition? And, further, what possibilities did it open for her?

3.2. Opposition versus alignment: Cavendish’s uses of Descartes’ thinking

It is easy to see how some proponents of feminist theory regard Cavendish’s work as oppositional to mechanistic theories, especially those of Descartes. Such arguments see Cavendish’s idea of an animated world as anti-mechanistic, opposing Descartes’ central premise of the body-mind split and its distinction into *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. This distinction is interpreted as generating a subject-object binary which had long-term consequences for power relations between men and women in Western Europe.³⁵ Yet Cavendish’s understanding and use of Descartes’ theories was complex. As Sarah Hutton argues, while Cavendish may be categorized as a feminist writer for her anti-mechanistic arguments,³⁶ it must also be acknowledged that there were many aspects of Hobbes and Descartes’ mechanistic theories with which she felt in complete agreement. Hutton strongly emphasises Cavendish’s alignment with Thomas Hobbes and her contribution to European natural philosophy.

³⁴ Vincent B. Leitch (1983), *Deconstructive Criticism: An advanced introduction*, New York & London: Hutchinson.

³⁵ See for instance Susan Bordo (1987), *The flight to objectivity. Essays on Cartesianism and Culture*. Albany: State University of New York Press; Genevieve Lloyd (1999), “Reason as Attainment”, in: Susan Bordo (1999) *Feminist Interpretations of René Descartes*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press.

³⁶ Sarah Hutton: “it has become almost commonplace to underline the *unlikeness* of Cavendish’s thought to the philosophy of her male contemporaries, especially to the so-called *mechanical* philosophy whose chief proponents were Descartes and Hobbes.” In: Sarah Hutton (1997), “In Dialogue with Thomas Hobbes”, p. 422.

Indeed, Cavendish took a strong opposition to Descartes with her own set of ideas. I would like, now, to examine the arguments advanced in her later work *Philosophical Letters* (1664), written after she had become well acquainted with Descartes' theories. Employing, as we have seen, the thinly veiled disguise of a female correspondent, Cavendish articulates her complete repudiation of Descartes' entire concept of the body-mind split with its hierarchical consequences, as well as his concept of the passions:

Neither can I apprehend, that the Mind's or Soul's seat should be in the *Glandula* or kernel of the Brain, and there sit like a Spider in a Cobweb, to whom the least motion of the Cobweb gives intelligence of a Flye, which he is ready to assault, and that the Brain should get intelligence by the animal spirits as his servants, which run to and for like Ants to inform it; ... and that the sensitive organs should have no knowledge in themselves, but serve onely like peeping-holes for the mind, or barn-dores to receive bundles of pressures, like sheaves of Corn; For there being a thorow mixture of animate, rational and sensitive, and inanimate matter, we cannot assign a certain seat or place to the rational, another to the sensitive, and another to the inanimate, but they are disused and intermixt throughout all the body; And this is the reason, that sense and knowledge cannot be bound onely to the head or brain". (*Philosophical Letters*, 1664, p. 111)

Cavendish specified her critique of the body-mind split by denying Descartes' idea of the incorporeal³⁷ and espoused a thoroughgoing material view of the world. For her all there was in nature was of material substance:

But in my opinion, Nature is material, and not any thing in Nature, what belongs to her, is immaterial; but whatsoever is Immaterial, is Supernatural, Therefore Motions, Forms, Thoughts, Ideas, Conceptions, Sympathies, Antipathies, Accidents, Qualities, as also

³⁷ In the *Discourse* Descartes declared the mind to be incorporeal: "I knew then that I was a substance, whose whole essence or nature is, but to *think*, and who to *be*, hath need of no place, nor depends on any materiall thing." In: René Descartes (1649), *A Discourse of a Method*, p. 52.

Natural Life, and Soul, are all Material. (*Philosophical Letters*, 1664, p. 12)

The perceivable qualities of material substances were, in Cavendish's thinking, however, not limited to size and shape, as they were in a Cartesian understanding. For Descartes, material substance was lifeless and passive having to be objectified in order to understand it – a view Cavendish strongly opposed. She argued against the mechanist move of splitting the body from the mind creating two sharply defined differing realms and brought them back together:

[T]his sensitive and rational matter (doth neither) remain or act in one place of the Brain, but in every part thereof; and not onely in every part of Man's Body, but in every part of Nature. (*Philosophical Letters*, 1664, p. 185)

She further explained her version of natural philosophy in *Philosophical Letters*. In her opinion, everything possessed life, soul, sense, and reason:

[A]nd that there is not any Creature or part of nature without this Life and Soul; and that not onely Animals, but also Vegetables, Minerals and Elements, and what more is in Nature, are endued with this Life and Soul, Sense and Reason; (*Philosophical Letters*, 1664, part: The Preface, not paginated).

Unlike her modern philosophical contemporaries, she understood the source of movement, as of thinking, to be internal to matter, not external, as Descartes believed. In her version of natural philosophy, no inert objects were to be found and motion belonged, like shape and size, to the catalogue of categories describing an object.

[F]or in all probability it appears to humane sense and reason, that the cause of every particular material Creature is the onely and Infinite Matter, which has Motions and Figures inseparably united; for Matter, Motion and Figure, are but one thing, individable in its Nature. (*Philosophical Letters*, 1664, p. 11)

Although this might be perceived by modern readers as an eccentric position, Susan James has shown that even those of Cavendish's philosophical contemporaries who opposed this view had once given it serious consideration, as can be seen in the correspondence between More and Descartes dating from 1649.³⁸ An examination of the private correspondence of Cavendish's philosophical contemporaries demonstrates that her thought was quite in line with the scientific discourse of time and not, as has been argued by much of the secondary literature, detached from it.

In examining the vitalist qualities of Cavendish's work, a comparison with the work of her female contemporary, the vitalist Anne Conway, offers a new perspective. In her posthumously published book, *The Principles of the most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (1692), Conway argued strongly against mechanistic thinking, contrasting it with the development of a (Platonic) vitalist position that allows for no materiality whatsoever. Cavendish, conversely, defined knowable substances as corporeal, following mechanists like Hobbes and Descartes. Descartes asked his reader to turn to the "great book of the World" away from the "study of Letters" (*Discourse*, 1649, p. 15). His understanding of the existence of the corporeal followed from his theory of the body-mind split.³⁹ Although Cavendish disagreed

³⁸ More confessed: 'I feel more disposed to believe that motion is not communicated, but that from the impulse of one body another body is so to speak roused into motion, like the mind to a thought on this or that occasion ... neither [the motion nor the thought] is received into the subject, in fact, but both arise from the subject which they are found.' Quoted in: Alan Gabbey (1982), "Philosophia Cartesiana Triumphata: Henry More (1646-1671)", in: Thomas M. Lennon / John M. Nicholas / John W. Davis (eds.), *Problems of Cartesianism*, Kingston / Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, pp. 171-250.

³⁹ See Descartes' *Principia Philosophia* published in 1664 in London, *Pars Secunda: De Principiis rerum materialium* and in his *Meditationes* also published in 1664 in London, *Meditatio Sexta: De rerum materialium existentia, & reali mentis à corpore distinctione*, in which he argued for the materiality of the substance. Both works were published in Latin in 1664. Still Cavendish had exact knowledge of the two books, which becomes obvious from the many of Descartes' examples Cavendish referred to. She for instance criticised Descartes for his example of a man sitting in the body of a ship, but at the same time being moved by the movement of the ship. Descartes' assumption that there was a difference between an interior and exterior place didn't work for Cavendish. In her thinking place belonged to materiality. I am reading those analogies as a proof that Descartes' *Principia Philosophia* and *Meditationes* were at least partly translated for Cavendish, as she had already mentioned in *Philosophical Letters* (1664): "The Authors whose opinions I mention, I have read, as I found them

philosophically with Cartesian dualism, she shared Descartes' views on materiality: "Matter is that we name Body; which Matter cannot be less, or more, than Body" (*Grounds of Natural Philosophy*, 1668, p. 1). For Cavendish, as for Descartes, substances were corporeal and knowable. For both, the enquiry about the being of substances was not exclusively dominated by the senses. In his search for a method to find 'genuine truth', Descartes had demonstrated that the senses were only partly to be trusted as the ultimate cognitive instrument. In the *Discourse* he had already argued that the senses deceive the individual quite easily. Moreover, he identified reason as the only human capacity that is able to find singular truth. Cavendish was strongly affected by this view and aligned with the prioritisation of reason over the senses. She, thus, turned away from Baconian science, characterised by its inductive method, which enjoyed a great following among a strong fraction of empiricists in England, who represented the work of the Royal Society. She wrote:

Reason must direct first how sense ought to work, and so much as the Rational knowledge is more noble then the Sensitive, so much is the speculative part of Philosophy more noble then the Mechanical. (*Observations upon the Experimental Philosophy*, 1668, no pagination)

She rejected the senses, favouring the speculative aspect of philosophy over the mechanical. Descartes' notion of innate ideas had intrigued her in this respect, as well as his inward turn, away from the authority of moral judgement, placing emphasis instead on the inquiring individuals themselves.⁴⁰ Cavendish understood contemplation or discourse as "an arguing of the mind, or a rational enquiry into the causes of natural effects," which will "sooner find out nature's corporeal figurative motions" (*Observations*, 1668, p. 14). It is no wonder, then, that Cavendish's natural philosophy was produced without including any empirical studies. What is more, she mocked empirical approaches, as her remarks on Hooke's optical studies in *Observations upon experimental Philosophy* show. Samuel I. Mintz has argued that *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy*, "despite numerous references to telescopes, lodestones, seeds, and magnifying glasses, was essentially a plea for more contemplation and less experimentation in science."⁴¹ Another example

printed, in my native Language, except Des Cartes, who being in Latine, I had some few places translated to me out of his works," (*The Preface*, no pagination).

⁴⁰ See Charles Taylor (1989), *The Sources of the Self*, Part on Descartes.

⁴¹ Samuel I. Mintz (1952), "The Duchess of Newcastle's visit to the Royal Society",

showing Cavendish's inward turn and affirmative speculation was provided by the so-called Rupert Drops⁴² – a scientific attraction of the seventeenth century not understood even by the greatest philosophers – which were given to her by the learned anglophile Constantijn Huygens. Having exchanged letters with Cavendish, Huygens was well aware of her interest in natural philosophy. In one letter he asked her to examine and explain the curiosity he had enclosed. Her answer demonstrates how she dealt with such scientific enquiries. Clearly rejecting an empirical interpretation, she contemplated this phenomenon, and came to the self-confidently expressed opinion that the explosion of the drops was caused by “oily spirits or essences of sulphur” and that the scratching of the tail worked like the powder in a gun as “fiery spirits”, which then shattered the glass.⁴³

Descartes held that the individual was characterised by its divinely given rational abilities, enabling it to understand the entire being of an object, a representation of its species or form. Cavendish, however, disputed this unlimited empowerment of the individual. With her rejection of the body-mind split, she pursued a different notion of nature from which humankind was not separated. This differed fundamentally to Descartes' thinking, where the individual occupied the subject position, hierarchically opposed to the object. Cavendish's differing notion of nature, thus, also resulted in a fundamentally different understanding of the cognitive possibilities of humankind:

[N]ature being material, and consequently divisible, her parts have but divided knowledges, and none can claim a universal infinite knowledge.
(*Observations*, 1668, p. 14).

According to Cavendish the cognitive power of the individual was limited, just as the knowable structure of substances. As nature and, therefore, substances were divisible (a view undisputed by Descartes), knowledge of nature, too, was divisible, making, for Cavendish, a universal absolute knowledge impossible and so she turned instead to the notion of various knowledges. Cavendish's natural philosophy thus

p. 168.

⁴² Rupert drops were produced by pouring molten glass into water, exploding when scratched over their tail, which was a result of the inner tension built up by the rapid cooling.

⁴³ J.A. Worp (1916), *De Briefwisseling van Constantijn Huygens*, vol. 5 and vol. 6,

evolved into one of scepticism – at least in the sense that there was no Cartesian *Matrix Universalis* enabling the individual to find out a singular truth, since there was no singular individual truth possible in Cavendish's heterogeneous characterisation of nature.⁴⁴ She had thus initially followed Descartes' *a priori* principle, turning later to a much broader frame of interpretation, combining elements from two opposing but equally popular ways of thinking – vitalist and mechanist – formulating her own version of natural philosophy.

3.3. Cartesianism as a strategy of female empowerment

Cavendish knew well what was expected of a woman, as she wrote in her first published work: "True it is, Spinning with the Fingers is more proper to our Sexe, then studying or writing Poetry, which is the Spinning with the braine" (*Poems and Fancies*, 1653). She nevertheless dared to challenge gender boundaries, consciously shunning female decorum:

[B]ut I having no skill in the Art of the first (and if I had, I had no hopes of gaining so much as to make me a Garment to keep me from the cold) made me delight in the latter; since all braines work naturally, and incessantly, in some kinde or other; which made me endeavour to Spin a Garment of Memory" (*Poems and Fancies*, 1653, no pagination).

In citing the natural functions of the brain, Cavendish already implied that – at a time when women were valued exclusively for their virtue and chastity – her interests were to focus on realms traditionally understood to be the prerogatives of men. Not only did she study natural philosophy but she wrote and published books. Refusing to pursue her intellectual and shockingly 'unladylike' interests in a clandestine manner, the Duchess claimed public space for them. She even distributed her books among European intellectuals, including Henry More and Constantijn Huygens, from whom

The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, p. 187 and pp. 284-286.

⁴⁴ I do not agree with Lisa T. Sarasohn's reading of Cavendish as a sceptic who claims that she had "no other choice but to advocate a full-scale scepticism; the path to conventional knowledge was closed to her." In: Lisa T. Sarasohn (1984), "A Science Turned Upside Down: Feminism and the Natural Philosophy of Margaret

she requested comments and reviews. Cavendish, moreover, donated her books to Universities – the strongholds of male learning.⁴⁵ Though women were generally excluded from institutions of learning, Cavendish regarded herself as a scholar playing an active role in a community of scholars, complaining bitterly about being denied the opportunity to teach her theories. In a letter from 1667, Mary Evelyn summarised Cavendish's self perception as she had witnessed it in a conversation with Dr Charlton: "She [Cavendish] swore if the schools did not banish Aristotle and read Margaret, Duchess of Newcastle, they did her wrong and deserved to be utterly abolished."⁴⁶ Cavendish further dared to request a visit to the Royal Society, an institution she highly respected.⁴⁷ Her wish was granted, and in 1667 Cavendish became the first woman to visit the Royal Society, an institution that did not permit female membership until 1945.⁴⁸

While her aristocratic status afforded her the extraordinary privilege of exploring her interests and engaging in a voyage of self-discovery unimaginable for most women, Cavendish's transgression of gender boundaries should not be put down to the eccentric "extracurricular" activity of a well-to-do lady. Instead, we must recognize that Cavendish used her position and advantage on behalf of her female contemporaries. Descartes' postulate of equal individual rationality strengthened

Cavendish, pp. 289-307.

⁴⁵ See notes of thanks from Oxford and Cambridge in: Anonymous (1676), *Letters and Poems in honour of the Incomparable Princess, Margaret, Duchess of Newcastle*, London: Printed by Thomas Newcombe.

⁴⁶ The letter was addressed to Ralph Bohun at Oxford the tutor of Mary Evelyn's son. In: Francis Harris (1997), "Living in the Neighbourhood of Science: Mary Evelyn, Margaret Cavendish and the Greshamites," pp. 198-199.

⁴⁷ Cavendish requested a visit to the Royal Society in 1667 through Lord Berkeley, which was initially much opposed by its members, but, as a result of the eloquent argumentation of Cavendish's friend Dr Charleton, she was finally accepted. It is known from Pepys' diary that Cavendish's visit was most spectacular and that many important men of science had gathered: "among others, of one that did while she was there turn a piece of roasted mutton into pure blood – which was very rare – here was Mr. Moore of Cambridge, who I had not seen before, and I was glad to see him." In: Samuel Pepys (1976), vol. 9, p. 243. On Cavendish's visit to the Royal Society see also Samuel I. Mintz (1952), "The Duchess of Newcastle's visit to the Royal Society".

⁴⁸ See Londa Schiebinger who also points out that "for nearly three hundred years the only permanent female presence at the Royal Society was a skeleton preserved in the society's anatomical collection." In: Londa Schiebinger (1989), *The Mind has no Sex? Women in the Origins of Modern Science*, Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: Harvard University Press, p. 26.

Cavendish's belief in her own rational and intellectual capacities and helped the bashful young woman to develop an extraordinary self-confidence to pursue her studies. Cartesianism was clearly an empowerment strategy for Cavendish, enabling her intrusion into masculine intellectual territory. It was only by employing the supportive structure of this validating intellectual framework that she was able to present herself as a learned woman, publishing fourteen books on various topics.

I want to turn, now, to an examination of Cavendish's adaptation of Descartes' theories in her early text of 1655, *Philosophical and Physical Opinions (PPO)*. For Descartes, all individuals possessed equal rationality. His focus on individual rational capabilities supported a turn to the individual's inner potential, offering independence from external moral sources.⁴⁹ This Cartesian turn allowed Cavendish, who interpreted this concept to be gender neutral, a degree of intellectual independence from a male culture that denied the existence of any significant rational faculty in women. It helped her give voice to her experience of self as possessing rational qualities equal to those of her male contemporaries, and to contend that the products of her rational mind were as valuable as those of some of the most highly praised male members of society. If all individuals were blessed with rational capacities, why should she be denied participation in the intellectual community?

Naturally, definitions offered by Cavendish of her own rational capability, and that of women in general, often sound as if she sought both to persuade her readership and reassure herself. In the section *The Text to My Natural Sermon*, for instance, she implored potential student-readers to "cast me not out of your Schools, nor condemn my opinions, out of a dispisement of my Sex" in an attempt to legitimate the production of natural philosophy by explaining that women were as rationally capable as their male contemporaries:

⁴⁹ For the idea of reorganising the source of knowledge from the 'outside' to the 'inside' of the individual see Charles Taylor (1989), *Sources of the Self*, in his chapter on René Descartes.

[F]or though nature hath made the active strength of the effeminate Sex weaker then the masculine, yet perchance she may elevate some fancies, and create some opinions, as sublime, and probable in effeminate brains as in masculine. (*The Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, 1655, The Text to My Natural Sermon)

Although Cavendish firmly stakes her claim to an equal rationality, she was obliged to do so obliquely and to avoid over-asserting her already daring position of female author. Her argument that the opinions of women were equally as “sublime” as men’s sought to legitimate her participation in realms to which women were generally denied access and justify her right to become a philosopher.

But Cavendish drew enough validation from Cartesianism to argue for her own purposes. The ideas following from Descartes’ argument of equal individual rationality, as we have seen, were of particular interest for Cavendish. With the inward turn of the individual to its own rational abilities, Descartes rejected the conventional curriculum of schools and universities. Such teaching, he proclaimed, did not bring real “truth”. Cavendish, as a woman excluded from formal, institutional education, felt particularly drawn to this line of thinking – as did women in general – and adopted Descartes’ rhetoric of *ratio* versus education: “natural reason is a better tutor then education” (*The Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, To the Reader, no pagination).⁵⁰ Descartes’ claim of individual rational capabilities thus enabled Cavendish to make redundant the need for male institutional education:

[F]or natural reason produceth beneficial effects, and findes out the right and the truth, the wrong and the falshood of things, or causes; but to conclude, what education hath not instructed me, natural Reason hath informed me of many things. (*The Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, 1655, To the Reader, no pagination)

⁵⁰ In Descartes’ English version of the *Discourse* the comparable passage reads: “By reason whereof, as soon as my years freed me from the subjection of my (15) Tutors, I wholly gave over the study of Letters, and resolving to seek no other knowledge but what I could finde in my self, or in the great book of the World.” René Descartes (1649), *Discourse*, p. 14.

Indeed, qualified by Cartesian natural reason, Cavendish's lack of education and that of her female contemporaries could now be seen as a blessing in disguise. Descartes' notion of individual rationality relying on natural reason affirmed her 'natural wit' and 'fancies of our own braines' as synonyms set in contrast to conventional learning:

Besides, I have heard that learning spoiles the natural wit, and the fancies, of others, drive the fancies out of our own braines, as enemies to the nature, or at least troublesome guests that fill up all the rooms of the house. This opinion, or rather a known truth, was a sufficient cause for me, neither to read many Books, or hear arguments, or to dispute opinions, had I ever been edicted to one, or accustomed to the other, by reason I found a naturall inclination, or motion in my own brain to fancies, and truly I am as all the world is, partial, although perchance, or at least I hope not so much as many are, yet enough to desire that my own fancies, and opinions might live in the world, rather then the fancies and opinions of other mens in my brain. (*The Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, 1655, An Epiloge, no pagination)

Cavendish's claim not to have read many books should not be taken at face value, but, again, interpreted as a clever strategy in daring to claim access to territory traditionally reserved for men. Still, her arguments should not be misunderstood as an opposition to education in general. Her position is, more accurately, concerned with constructing a rhetorical figure which would demonstrate the existence and strength of female rationality, a notion completely at odds with an educational system which excluded women on the grounds of their alleged lack of rational capacities. In essence, her denunciation of institutional learning should be read in the context of a struggle for intellectual independence from restrictive male power.

With each of her publications Cavendish demonstrated her female rationality. Guided by her Cartesian conviction that women possessed as great a rational capacity as their male contemporaries, she went on to analyse why they were nevertheless denied a formal education. In the section of *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* addressed 'To the Two Universities', Cavendish claimed that the superiority of men to women was the result of sheer tradition, producing an unquestioned social

order. She questioned this custom in the same manner in which Descartes had questioned all custom to establish a thorough notion of truth. According to the Duchess, custom or opinion was a social force organising society:

[T]hus by an opinion, which I hope is but an erroneous one in men, we are shut out of all power, and Authority by reason we are never employed either in civil nor marshall affaires, our counsels are despised, and laughed at, the best of our actions are troden down with scorn, by the over-wearing conceit men have of themselves and through a dispisement of us. (*The Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, 1655, To the two Universities, no pagination)

The Duchess argued that this established custom should not go unchallenged. Her position on this issue came to form a key element of her criticisms regarding the restrictions applied to women in society. In her new-found self-assurance, she dared to claim the rational capacities of the sexes to be equal and was the first English woman to do so in print, directly relating her assertions to a demand for female education:

[The masculine sex] think ... it impossible we should have either learning or understanding, wit or judgment, as if we had not rational souls as well as men. (*The Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, 1655, To the Two Universities).

For Cavendish, the possession of rational capacities carried with it the obligation to cultivate them through education, as Descartes had already argued in his *Discourse*. To neglect the female *ratio* by not granting it an adequate education was, thus, to risk its corruption. In the preface directed to the 'Two Universities' as the principle realms of male education, Cavendish further developed her views into an explanation about why women should be supported in their desire for education:

I Here present the sum of my works, not that I think wise School-men, and industrious, laborious students should value my book for any worth, but to receive it without a scorn, for the good incouragement of our sex, lest in time we should grow irrational idiots, by the defectedsnesse of our Spirits, through the carelesse neglects, and despisements of masculine

Sex to the effeminate. (*The Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, 1655,
To the Two Universities)

Cavendish demonstrated the sophistication of her critical faculty in describing the gendered order and, importantly, its potential alternatives. To her credit, Cavendish did not hold men entirely responsible for the miserable situation of women, but addressed women directly in questioning their own attitudes to their exclusion from learning. She focused on a psychological moment to reveal how deeply women had internalised structures working against their own interests and actively participated in this restrictive social system:

[A]nd we out of a custom of defectedsnesse think so too, which makes us quit all industry towards profitable knowledge being imployed onely in love and pettie employments, which takes away not onely our abilities towards arts, but higher capacities in speculations, so as we are become like worms that onely live in the dull earth of ignorance, winding our selves sometimes out, by the help of some refreshing rain of good educations which seldom is given us; (*The Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, 1655, To the Two Universities).

Cavendish's astute description of the process of internalisation underscores the critical necessity for women to fully embrace the potential of their rational faculty – her comments are all the more poignant for highlighting a reality which stood in sharp contrast to a life led by reason. In arguing in favour of the rational abilities of women, Cavendish urged her female readers to claim the right to education for themselves, on the terms she had already provided – a process she underwent herself and documented in her texts. She did not abandon her readership to formulate their own disparate conceptions of a female education, supplying instead a concept of learning which was based on humanist principles but adapted for women. Her ideals for a women's education were adapted from a pattern of male education. Women, as Cavendish stressed, being as rational as men, were thus qualified and entitled to partake in the same ideals and aims of education. Coupling Descartes' notion of equal rationality with a humanist culture of honour, she formulated her conception of an education tailored for herself and her female contemporaries.

Cavendish was attracted by the ideal of humanist education in which the knowledge of the good was understood as a prerequisite to leading a virtuous life. Knowledge was to be passed on from the wiser members of society to the youngest to ensure they receive moral instruction. This notion is based on the second of Socrates' premises which considers the person who understands what is good and what is evil as the one who will recognise and choose the good, rejecting vice. Ottaviano of Castiglione's *Cortigiano* repeats this theme as „se il bene e'l male fossero ben conosciuti ed intesi, ognuno sempre eleggeria il bene e fuggiria il male.“⁵¹ This ideal was built on the motive of *Imitatio* which Cavendish used for her female contemporaries in a multiple sense as we shall see later.

Cavendish was further attracted by the humanist concept of honour and fame with the prospect of not being consigned to oblivion after death, but to live on to posterity through one's achievements. Jean Gagen describes Cavendish's desire for honour and fame “a goal for which, traditionally, only men had presumed to strive.”⁵² Cavendish did, indeed, aspire to these humanist standards and extolled her female contemporaries to follow her example:

But this Age hath produced many effeminate Writers, as well as Preachers, and many effeminate Rulers, as well as Actors. And if it be an Age when the effeminate spirits rule, as most visible they doe in every Kingdome, let us take the advantage, and make the best of our time, for feare their reigne should not last long, whether it be in the Amazonean Government, or in the Politick Common-wealth, or in flourishing Monarchy, or in Schooles of Divinity, or in Lectures of Philosophy, or in witty Poetry, or any thing that may bring honour to our Sex: for they are poore, dejected spirits, that are not ambitious of Fame. And though we be inferiour to Men, let us shew our selves a degree above Beasts; and not eate, and drink, and sleep away our time as they

⁵¹ “When it is well known what is good and what vice, it will always be the good which will be chosen and vice which will be rejected.” (my translation) Original: Baldesar Castiglione (reprint 1960), *Il libro del cortegiano*, edited by Giulio Preti, Turin. p. 365. Quoted in Hans Ulrich Musolff (1997), *Erziehung und Bildung in der Renaissance*, Köln: Böhlau Verlag, p. 185.

⁵² See Jean Gagen (1959), “Honor and Fame in the Works of the Duchess of Newcastle”.

doe; and live only to the sense, not to the reason, and so turne into forgotten dust. (*Poems and Fancies*, 1653, To all writing Ladies, p. 161)

Cavendish's language, here, contains intertextual references to a Humanist tradition reaching back to classical Literature. Pico della Mirandola is referenced in his belief that God placed humans in relative isolation, responsible for their own formation in the creation of a world order. Mankind, he had argued, was at the centre of the world to be its own creator and sculptor; man could according to its own wish either degenerate into the inferior sphere of beast or turn to the superior realm of divinity.⁵³ In humanist terms, this could only succeed with the help of education. In the context of Descartes' dualism, the distinction of beast and human being became even more severe. In Descartes' view animals were automata without rational abilities and human beings were to be distinguished from animals by their rational capacities. Although Cavendish opposed Descartes' dualism, she did not apply this perspective with consistency. When demanding education for women, Cavendish turned to precisely such a dualistic concept – interpreting the rational abilities of the individual to be a key element of the distinction from beast, thus establishing the imperative to cultivate such an ability in women. It was exactly this Cartesian thinking that Cavendish amalgamated into a Humanist concept, which she made available for her female readership.

Cavendish demonstrated by her own example that learning had inspired her for the good and that through it she had indeed been able to secure herself a place in "Fames high Tower" and live "by remembrance on after ages". Most significantly, she had further argued that this was possible for other women as well. Cartesianism strengthened her resolve to envision her own goals and helped her to achieve them. Descartes developed the theories that had initially functioned as a framework, which Cavendish then used to formulate her own set of ideas. As G.A.J. Rogers once said of Descartes, that he made the English think,⁵⁴ he also inspired Cavendish to *think*

⁵³ The reference is to Pico della Mirandola, *Oratio de hominis dignitate*. In: Rainer Winkler (1987), *Pädagogische Epochen*, Düsseldorf: Schwann, p. 94.

⁵⁴ "What Descartes did to the English was perhaps the most important thing that a philosopher can do, he made them think." In: G.A.J. Rogers, "Descartes and the English", in: J. D. North / J.J. Roche (eds.) (1985), *The Light of Nature. Essays in the History and Philosophy of Science presented to A.C. Crombie*, p. 282.

for herself and claim part of a male intellectual culture for herself and encourage other members of her sex to do the same.

3.4. "Theators as publick patterns to take example from"

Cavendish claimed educational rights for her female contemporaries in almost all of the prefaces of her treatises, but, surprisingly, never produced a treatise exclusively on the subject. Thus, she has never been considered a reformer of female education. I would like to argue for her inclusion in this group, as she had, in fact, offered a clear ideal of female education to her contemporaries – not only, as we have seen, through the example of her own life, but through the medium of drama. Cartesianism had allowed her to appropriate Humanism as a general feature of her ideal of female education. The precise nature of Cavendish's female educational concept, however, has yet not been sufficiently explored. To this end, I would like, now, to look at her play *Youths Glory, and Deaths Banquet* to examine her portrayal of female education and learned women as represented in the play.⁵⁵ Of key interest here, too, are the forms of persuasion Cavendish employs to convince her readers in a way appropriate to their levels of education and habits of being.

In various works Cavendish mentions her wish to instruct her readership as she had done in *Natures Pictures* (1656):

[B]ut I hope this work of mine will rather quench Amorous passions, than inflame them, and beget chaste Thoughts, nourish love of Vertue, kindle humane Pitty, warme Charity, increase Civillity, strengthen fainting patience, encourage noble Industry, crown, Merit, instruct Life; and recreate Time, Also I hope, I will damme vices, kill follies, prevent Errors, forwarne youth, and arme the life against misfortunes: Likewise to admonish, instruct, direct, and perswade to the which is good and

⁵⁵ Annette Kramer has claimed that Cavendish makes educational demands with *Youths Glory, and Deaths Banquet* but does not examine the cultural concepts behind those demands. Annette Kramer (1993), "Thus by the Musick of a Ladyes

best, and in so doing, I the Authoress have my wishes and reward.
(*Natures Pictures*, 1656, To the Reader, no pagination)

For Cavendish, the theatre represented one of the greatest schools, for it alone had the power to instruct its audience adequately, as she explained in the preface of her first publication of *Playes* (1662):

[A]nd in my opinion, a publick Theatre were a shorter way of education than their tedious and expensive Travels, both of the Nature of the Worlds and Mankind, by which they learn not only to know other men, but their own selves, than they can learn in any School, or in any Country or Kingdome in a year; but to conclude, a Poet is the best Tutor, and a Theatre is the best School that is for Youth to be educated by or in. (*Playes*, 1662, To the Readers, no pagination)

Cavendish contrasted the “grand tour” – an integral part of male education – to the positive learning effects of the theatre and applied this ideal to women as well. Sanspareille, for example, one of the main female characters of her play *Youths Glory, and Deaths Banquet*, explains that she rehearses verse in order to advance her learnedness. Yet Cavendish looked to the broader aspect of social patterns, she was concerned with the idea that theatres be “not only Schools to learn or practice in, but publick patterns to take example from” (*Playes*, p. 126). The motive of “publick patterns to take examples from” turns out to be of vital importance for understanding Cavendish’s goals in writing her play *Youths Glory, and Deaths Banquet*. This piece was to instruct her readership⁵⁶ on the meaning and consequences of an education for women that acknowledged woman’s rational capabilities. It was based on a humanist ideal of learning and worked through *Imitatio*. Cavendish created a scenario juxtaposing educated and non-educated women, allowing to experience the personal and social benefits of the educated woman and to draw a positive image of female learnedness. She thereby argued that education, by ensuring a life of virtue and honour, is imperative for both sexes.

Tongue': Margaret Cavendish's dramatic innovations in women's education", in: *Women's History Review*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 57-79.

⁵⁶ I will explain below why she addresses a ‘readership’ and not an audience.

Cavendish created two storylines for *Youths Glory, and Deaths Banquet*. The allegorical names of the characters refer to the instructive role each was intended to play. Sanspareille, whose name means “one without equal”, is introduced first. As a young woman she is educated by her father, who gave up a career in philosophy to educate his daughter. She too becomes a philosopher, though she dies from disease at the height of her success. The second storyline is that of Lady Innocence, a bashful woman who is yet too young to marry her future husband, Lord de L’Amour, but who is nevertheless dependent upon him after the death of her father. When slandered by her future husband’s married lover, Lady Incontinent, she kills herself. Lady Incontinent’s name suggests her inability to control herself. When she finally realises what she has done, Lady Incontinent kills herself as well, followed by Lord L’Amour, who commits suicide after realising how ignorant he had been.

Cavendish clearly foregrounds the pedagogical intentions of her play, starting with a discussion between the young female philosopher’s parents about the best way to educate women. The two parents discuss their aspirations for Sanspareille’s education. Her mother accuses her husband of keeping her daughter “as a Prisoner, and makes her a slave of her book, and your tedious moral discourses, when other children have Play-fellows, and toys to sport and passe their time withal” (*Playes*, p. 123). But Father Love counters that Sanspareille does indeed

[P]lay when she reads books of Poetry, and can there be nobler, amiabler, finer, usefuller, and wiser companions than the Sciences, or pleasanter Play-fellows than the Muses; can she have freer conversation, than with wit, or more various recreations than Scenes, Sonets and Poems; Tragical, Comical, and Musical and the like; Or have prettier toys to sport withal, than fancie, and hath not she liberty so many hours in the day, as children have to play in. (*Playes*, 1662, p. 123)

Sanspareille's mother, however, insists on educating her daughter according to decorum:

No no, I will have her bred, as to make a good housewife, as to know how to order her Family, breed her Children, govern her Servants, entertain her Neighbours, and to fashion herself to all companies, times and places. (*Playes*, 1662, p. 123)

Mother Love's aim is clearly to place Sanspareille at court to display her beauty, and to entice a rich man to marry her. "Educating" her daughter to meet these ideals she sees as her motherly duty. But her husband comments on this custom: "Let me tell you, Wife, that is the reason all women are fools; for women breeding up women, one fool breeding up another, and as long as that custom lasts there is no hopes of amendment" (p. 123). Father Love, here, clearly represents an oppositional voice to traditional female education. If Mother Love had done so – a woman transgressing social hierarchies openly demanding her daughter to follow suit – she would have had no authority.

The conflict between the parents over adequate female education is, furthermore, embodied in the ways Sanspareille and Lady Innocence lead their lives. The educational ideal posited by Father Love is a Humanist male ideal adapted for women, whom he considers to be as equally rational and capable as men. He articulates his ideal of having women educated in "learned schools, to noble Arts and Sciences, as wise men are" (*Playes*, p. 124). The conventional attitude, voiced by Mother Love, that "woman will be a woman, do what you can" is refuted in the course of the play. Woman will, indeed, remain a woman, but what Mother Love implies with this statement – that women have no choice but to marry and submit to family duties – is disproven by the example of Sanspareille. Because she is accepted and supported in her rational capabilities by her father, she is at liberty to choose for herself what is good for her. This premise allows Cavendish to forcefully state her belief that conventional female education, supposedly in accordance with female 'nature', can be changed into its complete opposite, as shown by the characters of the play. Cavendish illustrates that gendered social hierarchies are the result of custom rather than 'nature' and hence, though deeply entrenched, alterable. The figure of Mother Love might be seen, then, as Cavendish's contribution to the debate

on the worth of women – the *Querelle des Femmes* – which was fought out in England through pamphlets like *Haec-Vir, or The Womanish-Man* (1620) and its answer *Hic Mulier, or the Man-Woman* (1620).⁵⁷

Sanspareille's excellent education has prepared her well to make her own decisions. She 'designs a voyage' to conduct her life guided by rationality. Cavendish used this female character to show how her idea of humanist education could work for women. Sanspareille wants to achieve "the highest place in fames high tower" (*Playes*, p. 139), an argument Cavendish had made for herself many times. She decides against marriage, because marital duties oppose her learnedness, the basis for merit - "the only foundation whereon is built a glorious fame" (*Playes*, p. 139). Instead, she strives to become a philosopher placing her knowledge not outside but rather within the schools, giving lectures not in the home but to public audiences. Her father introduces her to the wisest philosophers (his colleagues) to whom she is to speak. But no one welcomes her and all consider a learned woman as "a Monster tis in Nature; since Nature hath denyed that Sex that fortitude of brain" (*Playes*, p. 134), as one of the philosophers insultingly points out. Sanspareille, however, demonstrates that, in fact, the opposite is true. In her speech to the wise philosophers, she claims that "speaking belongs as much to the Female Sex as to the Masculine; so as it be on sober Subjects, and to grave Fathers, and wise men, or intruth to any degree of Age, or Sex, or Birth" (*Playes*, p. 136). And further she argues that "it is not against nature and reason, but that women may discourse of several subjects as well as men, and that they may have as probable opinions, and as profitable inventions, as fresh fancies, as quick wits, and as easy expressions, as men" (*Playes*, p. 136/7). It is not, however, these arguments that convince her male audience but the quality of her talk on nature, which underlines her theoretical

⁵⁷ The *querelle des femmes* was a controversy over the nature and worth of women, which surfaced in literature and drama of the sixteenth century. It displayed intellectual achievements of a few mostly aristocratic female contemporaries. The first phase was often a rhetoric exercise but this changed in seventeenth century. The nature of women was then still discussed but far from being a rhetorical exercise the position of women in society was now at stake. In this controversy many voices intended to change the social situation of women and to voice an instruction female readers should follow. For a recent re-evaluation of the *querelle des femmes* cf. Gisela Engel / Friederike Hassauer et al. (eds.), *Geschlechterstreit am Beginn der europäischen Moderne. Die Querelle des Femmes*. Königstein: Helmer 2004.

position on the rational competence of women.⁵⁸ From the moment of this first presentation onwards, Sanspareille is accepted by the learned community, which takes up a critical impulse to question their former ideals. One of the philosophers who had been full of criticism towards Sanspareille revises his opinion once having listened to her, even criticising his own learnedness, represented by his philosopher's beard:

[W]e will all now send for Barbers, and in our great Philosophies despair, shave off our reverend beards, as excrements, which one did make us all esteemed as wife, and stuff boyes foot-balls with them. (*Playes*, 1662, p. 140)⁵⁹

While Sanspareille is advancing her career, in dialogue with her (male) audiences, the second storyline develops in the opposite direction, demonstrating the consequences of a conventional female education. Lady Incontinent and her lover, Lord L'Amour, are introduced. Lady Incontinent has left her rich husband, who treated her well, for her lover, a decision signifying her inability to rule her passions through her rational abilities. But Lord L'Amour forsakes her as he has resolved to marry. When she asks him why he chooses to marry, Lord L'Amour explains: "would you have me cut off the line of my Posterity by never marrying" (*Playes*, p. 124). Although he uses the language and aims of a culture of honour, Lord L'Amour does not live according to its principles let alone understand them. When Lady Incontinent remarks that his children might be fools, he responds, "that is none of my fault" (*Playes*, p. 126), representing his lack of understanding of the importance of education in general. This is further displayed by his decision to leave the responsibility of the education of his future wife to Lady Incontinent.

⁵⁸ Interestingly enough, it is exactly this structure that can be found in Cavendish's own publications. In her prefaces she often addressed women's / gender issues but turned to other topics in the main body of her books.

⁵⁹ It should be noted that it was Cavendish's husband William who wrote the passages which represent the philosophers.

Lady Innocence is presented in complete opposition to Sanspareille. It becomes increasingly obvious that the circumstances of the two women's lives are the direct result of their different forms of education. While Sanspareille decides not to marry and give public lectures on philosophy instead, Lady Innocence struggles to develop her self-esteem and to uphold her limited rights. Her worth is entirely conferred on her by her future husband, Lord L'Amour. As he gradually turns away from his lover, Lady Incontinent, towards his young and innocent fiancée, it turns out that precisely this is her undoing. It is the fulfilment of his affections towards her, which should make her happy, but which in fact have the reverse effect, suggesting the perils of marriage by positioning her within a hierarchy working mercilessly against her. Lady Innocence represents exactly this hierarchy in a conversation with her future husband, which is the reason for her low self-esteem:

I doubt my wit, is imperfect, and the ignorance of youth makes a discord in discourse, being not so experiencedly learned, nor artificially practised, as to speak harmoniously, where the want makes my conversation dull with circumspection and fear; which makes my wordes flow through my lips, like lead, heavy and slow. (*Playes*, 1662, p. 132)

Although she is not well educated, her reasoning is astute in perceiving the feckless and dishonourable character of her future husband. In a conversation with her maid she is convinced, on the one hand, that his character constitutes the "finest and richest stuff" of "Nature's Shop". Yet she alludes to his ill-reasoned behaviour and in doing so, through her, Cavendish reiterates the presence of a universal, if neglected, rational capability:

[I]f his Soul be not answerable to his person, he is fine no otherwayes; but as a fashionable and guy sute of Cloath on a deformed body; the Cloathes may be fine and handsome, but the body ill favoured; so the body may be handsome, but the Soul a foul deformed creature. (*Playes*, 1662, p. 135)

The more her future husband is attracted to Lady Innocence the more jealous Lady Incontinent becomes, until she finally accuses Lady Innocence of stealing a precious chain of pearls from her, which is carefully placed among her possessions by Lady

Incontinent in an effort to make her opponent less attractive to her lover. Forced to go before a bribed judge, Lady Innocence is too weak to defend herself. Bribed witnesses support the charges against her. Her education leaves her unequipped for such circumstances. Although she is able to articulate her feelings, she is not strong enough to stand up and reason before the court. The perception of the 'outside' is subsequently shown to have a constitutional effect on Lady Innocence's inner perception. Because it is generally believed that she has stolen the chain, she herself loses faith in her innocence and in her rational capabilities. Although she reasons correctly that she has not taken the chain, this truth dissolves before her eyes in the context of the other opinions speaking against her: "I am so confidently accus'd of this Theft, as I am half perswaded I did take the Chain, but that Honour and Honesty sayes I did not" (*Playes*, p. 165). The ignorant Lord L'Amour who is lead by his passions does not see through the intrigue. He insists that Lady Innocence withdraws from marrying him, as such a marriage would ruin his reputation: "The world would condemn me, if I should marry you, to stain my Posterity with your Crimes" (*Playes*, p. 168). Lady Innocence, however, has no power to turn away the ruin of her reputation. Her name already suggests her innocence, which has, however, lost its significance, as her reputation is inevitably ruined. Having thus lost the central female qualities – virtue and credibility – she feels she has no choice and resolves to kill herself. She dies alone without heirs through whom she could live into posterity. In terms of Cavendish's educational theories, she dies without having realised her human rational potential, like a beast.

Sanspareille's death stands in direct contrast to that of Lady Innocence. She will be remembered through the outcome of her rational capabilities, her outstanding philosophy. One of the admiring philosophers explains that "it is reported [that] her Statue shall be set up in every College, and the most publick places in the City, at the publick charge; and the Queen will build a Sumptuous and Glorious Tomb on her sleeping Ashes" (*Playes*, p. 173). Sanspareille thus has succeeded in achieving the humanist ideal of virtue, fame and glory to live into posterity. Further, her efforts reflect well upon her family, who indirectly share in her good standing. When Father Love speaks in the beginning "I wish my Posterity may last but as long as Homers lines" (*Playes*, p. 123) he sets a Humanist ideal of honour for himself. It will eventually be achieved, not through himself but through his daughter. Here is a man

who achieves fame and honour – aims of a humanist ideal, which were traditionally reserved for men only – through a woman, challenging traditional perceptions of the irrationality of women and of the inefficiency of female education.

When Lady Incontinent finally realises the damage she has done, she too, chooses to kill herself. Her suicide is intended as a warning of the consequences of sacrificing a woman's potential to irrational behaviour and divisive intrigue, which are, according to Cavendish, a direct corollary to an inadequate education. Thus Sanspareille informs her audience during a public lecture that, "the best Tutour is reason, and when the mind is distempered, or obstructed with Ignorance, education is the best Physick which purges it, cleanses and freeth it, from all gross, and foul, and filthy Errors" (*Playes*, p. 147). Significantly, Lord L'Amour throws Lady Incontinent's body into the forest to be consumed by animals. In Cavendish's distinction between human being and beast, mankind's rational capability was a defining characteristic and human beings were therefore not to die without being remembered by posterity. Lady Incontinent, however, does not even have a tombstone immortalising her name and dies unremembered like beasts.

Youths Glory, and Deaths Banquet is a general claim for the acknowledgement of equal individual rational capabilities, which carry an imperative to be cultivated by an adequate education. Cavendish did not focus on women as instruments of society but rather looked to their needs. A female education which is based on the rational capabilities of women, Cavendish claims, guarantees their virtuous behaviour. Virtues are, however, in this context not defined by the canon of conventional female education but tied to the male humanist concept of honour. With the comparison of gender stereotypical female behaviour versus that of an educated woman accepted in her rationality, Cavendish attempted to convince her readership of the importance of female education. She created, moreover, a scenario in *Youths Glory, and Deaths Banquet* in which her readership could identify with the consequences of whether or not a woman was educated. It can be speculated that the seventeenth-century general reader might have sympathised in the beginning with Lady Innocence's femininity and as a consequence with the values and definition of a woman's education from which it evolved. The plot, however, eventually directs the reader to the character of Sanspareille and her advanced

status, achieved through her education, which is based on a belief in her rational capacities. Her acknowledged erudition directs the focus of the reader to the theme of female education. It can thus be argued that the play was designed as an attempt to convince a general readership of the rational capability of women and of the very necessity to grant them an adequate education acknowledging those circumstances.

An examination of the many prefaces to Cavendish's *Plays* clearly indicates that her drama productions were addressed to a general readership. The instructive dimensions, however, held a different significance for men than for women, one with far-reaching social ramifications for her female contemporaries. Her *Plays*, written during her Antwerp exile, were not performed in her life time. She produced them during the Interregnum, when actresses and drama performances were prohibited in England. It can, thus, be assumed that Cavendish had intentionally produced her plays as closet dramas. As maid of honour to Queen Henrietta Maria, she became acquainted with the Queen's native custom of spoken drama. Performed not as masques but read aloud by women to a female audience, female acting became a fashionable and controversial medium at the same time.⁶⁰ Under these circumstances, we must agree with Sophie Tomlinson's argument that Cavendish had no intention to produce her plays for female actors.⁶¹ They were rather produced for a female readership before whom the Duchess could enact various possibilities with an almost unimaginable liberty: "[o]ne of the most striking features of Cavendish's plays is their use of performance as a metaphor of possibility for women."⁶² Tomlinson understands the custom of reading plays "as a means of becoming or self-realization"⁶³ for women. Cavendish offered female readers the opportunity to vicariously live out different lives through their identification with the various female characters of *Youths Glory, and Deaths Banquet*. Cavendish's dramatic form reflected her understanding of a female psychology that had so internalised the social order in which women were perceived as irrational. Thus, her

⁶⁰ On Queen Henrietta Maria's custom of spoken drama see Sophie Tomlinson (1992), "She that plays the King: Henrietta Maria and the Threat of the Actress in Caroline Culture", in: Gordon McMullan / Jonathan Hope, *The Politics of Tragicomedy. Shakespeare and After*, London & New York: Routledge, pp. 189-207.

⁶¹ Sophie Tomlinson (1992), "'My Brain the Stage': Margaret Cavendish and the Fantasy of Female Performance", in: Clare Brant / Diane Purkiss, *Women, Texts and Histories 1575-1760*, London & New York: Routledge, p. 140.

⁶² Ibid., p. 137.

narrative gently guides the reader to identify, first, with Lady Innocence, who embodies the principles of an education based on traditional female decorum. Only later, directed by the events of the narrative and the consequences of the characters' respective choices, does the reader eventually identify with Sanspareille. This transferral of sympathies, ideally, leads them to accept the notion of female rational capabilities of their own as well as the imperative to cultivate them through an adequate education. The figure of Sanspareille demonstrates what could be possible for a woman and, insofar serves as an inspiration and catalyst for the female readership of the play. Though, as we have seen, the name Sanspareille means "without equal", her character is presented in the play as a model on which to educate women through a humanist female *Imitatio*. As Cavendish suggests with her words, "my brain the stage", the play was intended to initiate a performance of the female mind that would, in turn, inspire women to duplicate such behaviour in their real lives. Cavendish, in short, can be said to have written not for female actors but for 'acting' women.

My reading of *Youths Glory, and Deaths Banquet* understands Cavendish as attempting to convince her general readership of her Cartesian concept of *rational woman*. This concept was tied to her conviction that rationality implies an obligation to be cultivated through an adequate education. Ultimately, her aim was to achieve acceptance for female education in general and for its outcome - the learned lady. Cavendish did not place her demands in a theoretical treatise, but created a play, which sensitively dealt with the cognitive abilities of women in the form of drama. She did not affront her readers with her ideas and visions but rather presented scenarios affording the opportunity to consider closely the experience and consequences of a life led in accordance with conventional female decorum versus one which was structured by rationality. Cavendish, then, was clearly an educational reformist and must be acknowledged as such.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 136.

3.5. Cavendish as disseminator of Cartesian thinking

Cavendish was a spectacular woman who drew a lot of attention from her contemporaries. This attention increased the interest in and ensured a wider audience for her work, among which were many women who understood that Cavendish had argued for their rights. Through her self-representation and her work, Cavendish disseminated a strategy of self-empowerment, for which Cartesianism provided the initial catalyst and inspiration. Considered in combination with her petition demanding women's education, it can be argued that Cavendish empowered her female contemporaries to acknowledge and act upon their rational faculties.

Cavendish was famous for raising a stir with her extraordinary behaviour, even appearing "in public extravagantly dressed in dashing costumes of her own design ... Sometimes her menservants, ladies in waiting and coach were dressed to match".⁶⁴ Her literary productions were part of this extravagance, bringing her fame in equal measure. Cavendish's contemporary Dorothy Osborne made this analogy herself in commenting on the Duchess' first publication: "they say 'tis ten times more extravagant than her dress."⁶⁵ Such furore and public celebrity roused further interest in her publications, no doubt enticing a wider initial readership to at least peep into her books.

Yet Cavendish was also often severely criticised. In many respects she lived at odds with the contemporary ideal of femininity, as described, for example, by Mary Evelyn in a letter to her son's tutor Ralph Bohun at Oxford in 1667:

Women were not born to read authors, and censure the learned, to compare lives and judge of virtues, to give rules of morality, and sacrifice to the muses. We are willing to acknowledge all time borrowed from family duties is misspent; the care of children's education, observing a husband's commands, assisting the sick, relieving the poor,

⁶⁴ Kathleen Jones (1988), *A glorious Fame: The Life of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, 1623-1673*, London: Bloomsbury, p. 1.

⁶⁵ Dorothy Osborne (1928), *Letters from Dorothy Osborne to Sir William Temple*, pp. 41.

and being serviceable to our friends, are of sufficient weight to employ the most improved capacities amongst us.⁶⁶

Cavendish spent her time almost entirely doing what 'women were not born to' do. Her "deviant" behaviour, however, cannot simply be seen as a violation of an obligatory social order. Cavendish produced a 'negative fame' with her rejection of gender restrictions, which even increased the degree of her attraction. Dorothy Osborne, for instance, a woman who strictly upheld female decorum, was fascinated by the fact that Cavendish had written and published a book and felt an insatiable desire to obtain it. She pleaded desperately with her future husband, William Temple, for a copy of Cavendish's *Poems and Fancies* (1653). "And first let me ask you if you have seen a book of Poems newly come out, made by my Lady Newcastle." On 14 April 1653 she wrote to Temple: "for God sake if you meet with it send it me."⁶⁷

Twelve years later the Duchess' fame had merely increased. Samuel Mintz observed in his essay on her visit to the Royal Society that Cavendish had indeed been quite a celebrity: "the whole town was alive with gossip about her eccentric dress, her affected speech, her numerous carriages and retinue."⁶⁸ Samuel Pepys, too, was desperate to catch a glance of the extravagant Lady⁶⁹ and eager to study the productions of her pen. He reported in his *Diary* that Cavendish's biography of her husband *The Life of the Duke of Newcastle* was sent to his wife by a female friend. Still, Pepys was the first to read it:

Thence home: and there, in favour of my eyes, stayed at home reading the ridiculous history of my Lord Newcastle wrote by his wife, which shows her to be a mad, conceited, ridiculous woman, and he an asse to suffer [her] to write what she writes to him and of him. Betty Turner sent my wife the book to read; (Pepys, 1667 (1976), vol. 9, p. 123)

⁶⁶ Cited in Frances Harris (1997), p. 199. Original citation from: Evelyn (1859), IV, pp. 8-9: Mary Evelyn to Bohun [April 1667].

⁶⁷ Osborne's fascination turned into disgust a little later as she informed Temple: "You need not send me my Lady Newcastle's book at all for I have seen it, and am satisfied that there are many soberer people in Bedlam; I'll swear her friends are much to blame to let her go abroad." Dorothy Osborne (1928), *Letters from Dorothy Osborne to Sir William Temple*, pp. 37, 41.

⁶⁸ Samuel I. Mintz (1952), "The Duchess of Newcastle's visit to the Royal Society".

⁶⁹ See Pepys explanation on how many were eager to catch a glance of Cavendish, Samuel Pepys (1976, reprint of 1667), vol. 9, p. 243, March 30.

Though he did not value it in the end, Pepys had still devoted considerable time to its study. Pepys's wife and her friend Betty Turner were quite obviously much interested in what Cavendish had to say in the first biography written by a woman in England. Douglas Grant implies in his biography of Margaret Cavendish that Lucy Hutchinson's biography of her husband Colonel Hutchinson had been produced "under the inspiration of Margaret's *The Life of the Duke of Newcastle*."⁷⁰ It must be further noted that Cavendish opened the genre of biography to female authors with the implication that her rationality entitled her to do so, freeing the way for other women to follow suit. In the preface to *The Life of the Thrice Noble, High and Puissant Prince William Cavendishe* (1667) Cavendish apologises for her unlearned style and consequent spelling mistakes. She explains that her husband had not granted her the wish of being assisted by a learned secretary, arguing that, nevertheless, it was not the learnedness but its truthful content was essential:

Thus I was forced by his Graces Commands, to write this History in my own plain Style, without elegant Flourishings, or exquisit Method, relying intirely upon Truth, in the expressing whereof, I have been very circumspect; as knowing well, that his Graces Actions have so much Glory of their own, that they need borrow none from any bodies Industry. (*To His Grace the Duke of Newcastle*, no pagination)

With this qualification, Cavendish showed herself to be a tactician and obliged her husband to substantiate her credentials. Her implication, of course, being that she was fully capable rationally of writing such a history.

As we have seen, Cavendish wished to instruct her readers with her drama productions by demanding social acceptance for female education. However, Cavendish was also mindful of those who, like herself, lacked a classical education. Most philosophical treatises were published in Latin and even when written in English employed terminology which made an initial understanding nearly impossible. Descartes, thus, wrote his *Discours* in French to ensure that not only a learned minority but all interested readers could participate in scientific debate. Cavendish, on the other hand, was obliged to write in English – the only language she knew. She

⁷⁰ See Douglas Grant (1957), *Margaret the First. A Biography of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle 1623-1673*, p. 189.

nevertheless understood that writing in her native language was a challenge, as specialist terminology restricted the accessibility of a text. In her work *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, she emphasized that she wrote for those whose education did not enable them to understand learned terminology:

If you do write philosophy in English, and use all the hardest words and expressions which none but scholars are able to understand, you had better to write in Latin; but if you will write for those that do not understand Latin, your reason will tell you, that you must explain those hard words, and English them in the easiest manner you can; ... wherefore those that fill their writings with hard words, put the horses behind the coach, and instead of making hard things easy, make easy things hard, which especially in our English writers is a great fault; (*Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, 1666, part: To the Reader, no pagination)

Given that male members of the upper classes had at least the rudiments of a classical education, we can be fairly certain that Cavendish targeted her publications towards uninstructed women. She described the specific difficulties of her female contemporaries in acquiring learning in her *Observations* in 1668: “I will not say, but many of our Sex may have as much wit, and be capable of Learning as well as Men; but since they want Instructions, it is not possible they should attain to it; for Learning is Artificial but Wit is Natural” (*Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, 1666, To the Reader, no pagination).⁷¹ With her work she tried to change this reality for women.

Cavendish’s commitment and intentions towards her female contemporaries cannot be under-appreciated and the reception of her work should not be understood as a history of overall rejection. Her writing had not only been praised by men obliged to do so out of deference towards her social status, but had found genuine admirers. Numbering among these was Bathsua Makin, a middle class woman, who fought for the education of women by founding a school for the daughters of the gentry and wealthy. Makin wrote in *An Essay to Revive the Antient Education of Gentlemen*:

“The present Duchess of Newcastle, by her own genius, rather than any timely instruction, over-tops many grave gownmen.”⁷² Makin used the argument of women’s rationality to demand their intellectual training just as Cavendish did: “Had God intended women only as a finer sort of cattle, He would not have made them reasonable.”⁷³ Makin’s arguments bear witness to Cavendish’s influence on subsequent female generations with her adaptation of Cartesianism and its attendant implications for the education of women. Makin’s plans for a curriculum which would teach girls not only languages but also mathematics and philosophy further develop what Cavendish began with her publishing of natural philosophy and her demand to be accepted as a scientific authority, regardless of her sex.

⁷¹ This work has been reedited by Eileen O’Neil, Margaret Cavendish (2001, reprint of 1668), *Observations upon experimental philosophy*, Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press. The cited quote is on p. 11.

⁷² Bathsua Makin (1673), *An Essay to Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen*, p. 10. There has been a great controversy whether this text, which had been published anonymously, can be attributed to her. According to Noel Malcolm (1999) not Makin was the author of the treatise but rather her colleague Mark Lewis, “a minor Comenian educationalist.”

⁷³ Ibid., p. 10.

4. “For since GOD has given Women as well as Men intelligent Souls, why should they be forbidden to improve them?” - Mary Astell’s use of Cartesian ideas for the Ladies

Mary Astell (1666-1731) was one of the first English women to engage in public controversies with her own publications on political theory, natural philosophy, social and religious issues. In this respect, she differed greatly from her female contemporaries, most of whom did not dare to meddle in the ‘business’ of men. Like Cavendish, it was her adaptation of Cartesian thought that enabled her to achieve such an extraordinary position.

Astell’s use of Descartes’ ideas has never been fully acknowledged. While Joan Kinnaird noted already in 1979 “that science and mathematics, at least in Cartesian form, encouraged a new feminist sensibility that has yet to win the recognition and study it deserves”¹, there has been little subsequent research on the subject. Hilda Smith was one of the first to trace the Cartesian influence in Astell’s work.² The latest and most significant contribution has been Margaret Atherton’s essay comparing recent feminist theory with its assumption that Descartes’ theories made rationality an exclusively male attribute to the writings of Mary Astell and Damaris Masham and their use of Cartesian reason for women.³ Still there has not yet been a detailed study of Cartesian influence on Astell.

I would like to focus, here, then, on Astell’s use of Descartes’ ideas and her adaptation of this theoretical background to strengthen female rights. Astell is an extraordinary example of the appropriation of Descartes’ philosophy by an English woman. She not only used his ideas to create a unique intellectual position for herself, claiming equality with her male intellectual contemporaries, but at the same

¹ See Joan K. Kinnaird (1979), “Mary Astell and the Conservative Contribution to English Feminism”, in: *The Journal of British Studies*, vol. XIX, no.1, Fall, p. 60. Although Kinnaird has much enlightened the research on Mary Astell with this essay, I do not share her belief that Astell was part of a ‘new feminist sensibility’ nor that this notion can be used in a correct historical approach.

² Hilda Smith (1982), *Reason’s Disciples. Seventeenth-Century English Feminists*. Urbana & London: University of Illinois Press, pp. 64-65 and pp. 118-120.

³ Margaret Atherton (1993), “Cartesian Reason and Gendered Reason”, in: *A Mind of One’s Own. Feminist Essays on Reason & Objectivity*, Oxford: Westview Press, pp. 19-34. See also Margaret Atherton (ed.) (1994), *Women Philosophers of the Early Modern Period*, Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, pp. 3-4.

time documented that process by theorising it in the form of instructions intended for other women. In her two-part publication, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694 & 1697), Astell encouraged her female contemporaries to imitate her intellectual endeavours. These instructions not only demonstrate how Descartes' ideas were used to instruct the 'fair sex' but simultaneously bear witness, by the example of Astell herself, that these ideas were actually put into practice. Accordingly, my approach to Astell, here, is two-fold: on the one hand, it is biographical, taking account of her extraordinary life and intellectual achievements; and, on the other, it is explicatory, examining her documentation of her intellectual journey, which became nothing short of a theoretical manual for her female contemporaries. I regard the former as a model of a specifically female learning process, the latter as a female teaching process. Both bear the unmistakable marks of Cartesianism, which Astell employed as a tool in her struggle to liberate female learning and teaching.

Before taking a closer look at Astell and her works, I would like to comment briefly on the common perception of Astell as one of the 'first feminists'.⁴ The term 'feminist' should be used cautiously here as it assumes that women identified themselves as a social group through the disadvantages they suffered on account of their sex. Astell's inclusion in this category can only be undertaken with reservation since, despite her pleas for women's intellectual equality, she was deeply conscious of social rank. In her conservative attitude she wanted to improve society, yet without changing what for her were God-given hierarchies. It wasn't her wish to bring women into positions which were reserved for men. She therefore didn't claim that women should, for instance, be involved in public affairs, or be educated at universities.

⁴ See for instance Hilda Smith (1982), *Reason's Disciples*. Smith deals with Astell as a seventeenth-century feminist who can be linked to the central themes of later feminist movements. See also Bridget Hill (1989), *The First English Feminist*, Aldershot-Hants: Gower / Maurice Temple Smith. Hill edited some of Astell's texts in this edition, understanding the author as one of the first feminists.

4.1. An impoverished rational Lady

Like many of her female contemporaries, Astell did not enjoy a formal education. Astell was born in 1666 into a wealthy gentry family in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, who were members of the coal monopoly. Her life changed drastically at the age of twelve when, upon the death of her father, the family was thrust into poverty. Left with no dowry, Astell's chances to be married to a husband of her status and to continue her life of comfort were greatly diminished, and, as a woman, the opportunity of an independent life was very limited.

Though numerous grammar schools were founded at the time, these institutions were reserved exclusively for boys. No girl-school existed in Newcastle during Astell's time.⁵ Fortunately, her uncle Ralph Astell A.M. took it upon himself to educate his niece. He had been a curator of St. Nicholas in 1667 and was educated at Emmanuel College in Cambridge.⁶ During his years of study there in the 1650s, the university had been a stronghold of the Cambridge Platonists, who relied heavily on Descartes' ideas.⁷ This group of philosophers attacked materialist positions – like Hobbes' – by arguing for the pre-eminence of absolute spiritual values, proceeding from God, which governed the universe. They considered it their task to discover innate ideas in a Platonic manner, a task they held was assisted by reason and completed with its implementation in individual life.⁸ It is likely that her uncle was the first to expose Astell to Cartesian thought, raising a curiosity in his niece which she later pursued on her own. Tragically, Astell's uncle died when she was only thirteen years old, ending her tutelage. Yet she appeared to have been undaunted by this

⁵ See Ruth Perry (1986), *The Celebrated Mary Astell. An Early English Feminist*, London & Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, p. 43.

⁶ See John Brand, *History and Antiquities of the Town and Country of Newcastle-upon-Tyne*. 2 volumes. vol. 1, p. 144, and Florence Smith (1916), *Mary Astell*, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 5.

⁷ "Ralph Astell was first admitted as a pensioner to St John's College, but briefly emigrated to Emmanuel College, then very much under the sway of Ralph Cudworth, Benjamin Whichcote and John Worthington." Ruth Perry (1982), "The Veil of Chastity: Mary Astell's feminism", in: Paul-Gabriel Boucé (ed.) *Sexuality in eighteenth-century Britain*, p. 142.

⁸ On the Cambridge Platonists see G.A.J. Rogers / J.M. Vienne / Y.C. Zarka (eds.) (1997), *The Cambridge Platonists in Philosophical Context. Politics, Metaphysics and Religion*, Boston & London: Kluwer Academic Publishers; and Stefan Weyer (1993), *Die Cambridge Platonists*, Frankfurt & Berlin: Peter Lang.

set-back, becoming instead, as her accomplishments in later life demonstrate, an autodidact: a task she faced with the help of Cartesian philosophy.

At the age of twenty, Astell moved to London – a daring decision for a woman of her time. Astell settled in Chelsea, where she would stay for the remainder of her life. As Ruth Perry explains, Chelsea was something of a ‘female enclave’ of the time: “Besides the boarding school students who live there, a tax record of 1649 shows that one-fifth of the assessed population in Chelsea were single women, paying taxes for property in their own names.”⁹ Quite probably, Astell deliberately chose this location, being herself a single woman of modest means; still, her choice proved advantageous for her survival in later life and served as a site in which to realise her vision for girls and women.

To this day, there is not much detailed information on exactly how Astell managed to survive in London. Her limited resources were exhausted soon after her arrival. In desperation she apparently turned to archbishop William Sancroft, who had just been released from the Tower, where he had been interred with six other bishops for refusing to endorse James II’s Declaration of Indulgence – a position with which Astell, herself a Tory, strongly identified. Sancroft was well known for his charity.¹⁰ But alms alone could not suffice to support her; she needed to earn money – a circumstance creating the utmost difficulty for a woman of Astell’s time, as women of her rank were expected to be supported financially by their husbands and male relatives. Lacking both, Astell made the decision to publish her writing professionally, her conviction upheld by her (Cartesian) belief that her capacity for rational thought was equal to that of her male intellectual contemporaries. Though she perceived her body as that of a woman, she believed her mind to be sexless, as her numerous publications on the political, religious and philosophical issues of her day bear witness. Instead of operating within a restrained position Astell fiercely demonstrated a definite and radical opinion in her writings, implying full female rationality in equality to her male contemporaries.

⁹ Ruth Perry (1986), *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, p. 242.

¹⁰ Among all the pleas for help and acknowledgments of his generosity there is a letter in female hand requesting support, which Ruth Perry has identified as Astell’s handwriting and style. Furthermore a book survived, filled with poems and signed with the initials M.A., dedicated to archbishop William Sancroft, which can also be attributed to Mary Astell. See Ruth Perry (1986), *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, p. 67.

Astell took up clear and forcefully-argued positions on women's equal rational capacity in her work. In the face of her radical opinions and progressive demands she was nevertheless a thorough conservative. She was a monarchist, a High-Anglican and a Tory. Her intention was not to bring about a subversion of the divine symbolic order but rather to fulfil it to its fullest demands. Astell identified it as her primary task to counteract the decadence of contemporary society and demonstrate the right paths. The dark and uncontrolled nature of humankind was in her opinion represented by the Whigs and Dissenters – her political adversaries – against whom she repeatedly argued in her publications. It is nevertheless interesting to see that Astell continuously challenged the boundaries of her conservative orientation.

4.2. Astell – an accepted social critic

Astell produced eight works in her lifetime, each of which was an act of public vigilance as her idea was to improve society.¹¹ Her work was not that of an isolated thinker, putting together ideas from far ashore, or that of a woman longing for acceptance; rather, she was a full-fledged participant in the philosophical and political debates of her time. Astell immediately situated herself within current public controversy. It was her exceptional learning that allowed her to contribute to those debates. Not surprisingly, then, by the close of the seventeenth and start of the eighteenth century, Mary Astell had become a celebrity, well-known and widely read despite the fact that all her publications had been undertaken anonymously.

Astell began her intellectual career in 1694 with the publication of *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, which posited the equal rational abilities of men and women alike. Descartes' postulate of equal individual rationality had inspired her and she explicitly extended it to women. Like Cavendish, Astell too went on to argue that the possession of rational abilities carried with it the obligation to cultivate them and used

¹¹ Mary Astell's published works are: *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies I & II* (1694 & 1697), *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (1700), *Moderation Truly Stated* (1704), *A Fair way with the Dissenters and their Patrons* (1704), *An Impartial Enquiry into the Causes of Rebellion and Civil War* (1704), *The Christian Religion* (1705), *Bart'lemy Fair or an Enquiry after Wit* (1709).

this trajectory of thought to demand an adequate education for her female contemporaries which would acknowledge their capacity for reason. Her *Proposal* also outlines a plan to found a sequestered institution for rich aristocratic daughters to create a realm far removed from the distractions of a decadent world. There, the female pupils would concentrate on their minds instead of their bodies and physical appearance, as Astell believed they were wont to do. For Astell, the mind had an overall religious dimension. She saw it as key instrument in preparing for the after-life and ensuring the salvation of the soul. God, she argued, had created the individual as a rational being and it was therefore a sin not to use this divine rational potential. Though initial response to the *Proposal* was somewhat ambivalent, the book was an immediate success and became Astell's most popular work, going through four editions in seven years.¹²

In the meantime, Astell had begun corresponding with a scholar – a common way for contemporary women to be instructed and pursue intellectual exchange. Astell chose the scholar John Norris, a Cambridge Platonist who had already exchanged letters with Damaris Masham (1658-1708), the daughter of the Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth (1617-1688). In fact Norris even dedicated one of his early works, *Reflections upon the Conduct of Human Life* (1690), to Masham, who, however, eventually chose opposition to Norris and Astell, embracing the ideas of John Locke. Astell's epistolary exchange with Norris initially concentrated on his book *Christian Blessedness: or, Discourses upon the Beatitudes of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (1690). In the third volume of the *Discourses*, Norris argued that God was to be loved as the ultimate reason for all pleasure (p. 56). Astell, however, pointed out an inconsistency, for in her understanding God was the cause of all sensation; hence, not only pleasure but also pain was of divine origin,¹³ and should furthermore be seen as beneficial.¹⁴

¹² See Ruth Perry (1986), *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, pp. 459-460.

¹³ Astell's view on pain is hardly entirely explainable by the sufferings and utmost privations she endured in the first years of her solitary life in London as Ruth Perry suggested; See Ruth Perry (1986), *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, p. 16. Astell's opinion must rather be understood as part of her Tory attitude to which the principle of 'passive obedience' belonged, as Rachel Weil (1999) convincingly argued in *Political passions. Gender, the family and political argument in England 1680-1740*, Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press; chapter 6: Mary Astell: The Marriage of Toryism and Feminism, pp.122-142. This attitude prepared Astell to endure years of substantial material deprivation and not vice versa as Perry

Norris was much impressed by the competent answer of his female friend: "I hope you will in Equity, allow me some time to recover my self out of that wonder I was cast into, to see such a Letter from a Woman, besides what was necessary to consider the great and surprising Contents of it" (p. 8). Norris further praised Astell for the precision of her argument:

I find you thoroughly comprehend the Argument of my Discourse in that you have pitch'd upon the only material Objection to which it is liable; which you have (9) also pres'd so well, and so very home, that I can't but greatly admire the Light and Penetration of your Spirit. (p. 8-9).

Norris defended and clarified his line of argument, and they continued their epistolary exchange, for he was curious about Astell's views on religion and philosophy. He finally insisted on publishing their letters, but in order to preserve her anonymity, prefaced the publication saying, "Her Name I have not the Liberty to publish", identifying his co-author, instead, as the person who had also written the *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*. Their mutual publication bore the title *Letters Concerning the Love of God, Between the Author of the Proposal to the Ladies, and Mr. John Norris* (1695). Because the *Proposal* had already been taken for the work of Masham, the *Letters* were now believed to be from her pen, even more so since she was known for being close to Norris. But Masham did not wait long to produce a refutation directed towards Norris and Astell, anonymously publishing *The Discourse Concerning the Love of God* the same year.¹⁵

Unable to raise the funds necessary to found the women's college outlined in the *Proposal*, Astell expanded the work to a second part reflecting this change in circumstances. In the absence of an institution of higher learning, Astell felt it necessary to instruct her female readers how to concentrate on and cultivate their own rational abilities. Here, she made reference to philosophers like René Descartes,

suggested.

¹⁴ See Mary Astell and John Norris (1695), *Letters Concerning the Love of God*, London, pp. 1-2. On Astell's endurance see also Mary Beth Rose (1997) "'Vigorous most / when most unactive deem'd': Gender and the Heroics of Endurance in Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*, and Mary Astell's *Some Reflections upon Marriage*". In: *Milton Studies*, vol. 33, pp. 83-119.

¹⁵ See Patricia Springborg (1998), "Astell, Masham, and Locke: religion and politics", in: Hilda Smith (ed.), *Women Writers and the Early Modern British Political Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 106.

Nicolas Malebranche, and Antoine Arnault and encouraged her female readership to study them directly.

In her work *Some Reflections upon Marriage (Reflections)* of 1700, Astell analysed the unequal state of marriage, which she attributed to the growing political liberties of men. The famous Mazarin divorce had given Astell the occasion to write about women in society, about their inequality and the unpleasant realities they had to endure. Marriage and divorce were highly debated subjects in seventeenth-century England,¹⁶ a context Astell used to strongly criticise John Locke's notion of a free individual. She had already opposed Locke's sensualist epistemology, as presented in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), with Cartesian dualism.¹⁷ According to Descartes, sense perception was a very unreliable instrument – a position Astell endorsed especially in her criticism of her political opponent, the Whig Locke, whose ideas represented in her eyes the wicked tendencies of society. In criticising Locke's notion of a free individual she participated in a broader political debate, writing as a high Tory against Whig thinkers like John Locke and other natural rights theorists.

Astell's political attitudes clearly surfaced in her critique of Locke. The latter argued that an individual had the right to free himself from a King whose politics did not represent his subjects – the concept of “deserved obedience”.¹⁸ Only when the individual is represented by the ruler's politics will he submit. For Tories, the King was chosen by God and therefore had to be obeyed no matter how good or bad he ruled – the concept of “passive obedience”.¹⁹ Now Astell cleverly scrutinized Locke's argument in the context of her *Reflections* and her analysis of the female perspective of the conjugal sphere. In a provocative polemic, Astell feigned agreement with Locke's argument to pose the question, why, if the individual was free to choose

¹⁶ See for instance John Selden (1646), *Uxor Hebraica*, London.

¹⁷ See Cynthia B. Bryson's excellent article on Astell's criticism of Locke and her use of a Cartesian position in this controversy. Cynthia B. Bryson (1998), “Mary Astell: Defender of the ‘Disembodied Mind’”, in: *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, vol. 13, no. 4, pp. 40-62.

¹⁸ For the notion of “deserved obedience” see Rachel Weil (1999), *Political passions. Gender, the Family and Political Argument in England 1680-174*. Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press; chapter 6: Mary Astell: The Marriage of Toryism and Feminism, pp. 122-142.

¹⁹ See Rachel Weil (1999), *Political Passions*.

his/her sovereign, women could not dispose of their husbands when they ruled badly: "If *all Men are born free*, how is it that all women are born slaves?" (*Reflections*, p. 18). Her stern reproach at once revealed Locke's assumptions as exclusively male, pointing to Locke's arbitrariness which ascribed freedom to men alone and subjection and exclusion to rational women. To this day, scholarship has almost completely ignored the fact that the first critique to attack Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (1690) publicly must therefore be attributed to Astell and her work *Reflections* and not to Charles Leslie and his contribution to the Supplement of *The New Association, Part II* (1703).²⁰

Astell did not expose Locke's arguments because she wanted to rebel against the institution of marriage. In this context she is easily misinterpreted. Her critique was written for the sole purpose of demonstrating the inconsistency of Locke's theoretical assumptions. Patricia Springborg, for instance, argues that the power of a husband over his wife, a father over his family had no philosophical justification for Astell but was rather understood by her as a social and political expedient of the church.²¹ I would argue, instead, that Astell understood those interfamilial hierarchies as part of a divine order that had to be obeyed as a duty for everyone – men and women. What is genuinely interesting is Astell's way of using those conservative categories and challenging them from within. Indeed, she did not plea for a free position of wife. In her conservative attitude, a woman once married had to submit to the hierarchical structures of marriage, of which the husband represented the head, as Robert Filmer argued in his *Patriarcha* – a representation of patriarchal political theory.²² This attitude towards nuptial hierarchies was common, as can be seen in

²⁰ See also Patricia Springborg (1995), "Mary Astell (1666-1731), Critic of Locke", in: *American Political Science Review*, no. 3, September 1995, vol. 89, pp. 621-633 and also Springborg (1998), "Mary Astell and John Locke", in: Steven N. Zwicker (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature 1650-1740*, pp. 276-306. See further the above mentioned essay of Cynthia Bryson (1998), "Mary Astell: Defender of the 'Disembodied Mind'."

²¹ See Patricia Springborg (1998), "Astell, Masham, and John Locke," p. 108.

²² Although Filmer died in 1653 *Patriarcha* was only published in 1680. Filmer understood the hierarchies within the family as representative of the hierarchical implications of the State. The King held the power over his subjects as the Father held it over his family. Filmer understood both as not accountable to their subjects. His ideas were not entirely original but had been expressed by "critics of Catholic and Protestant resistance theories in late Elizabethan and Jacobean England." See Sir

Hannah Wooley's piece *A Guide to Ladies, Gentlewomen and Maids* (1668) voicing similar ideas by reminding women of their husband's rightful position: "For remember, that he is your head, and that you are commanded by God to be subject to him" (p. 62). When suffering from a tyrannical and unfair husband, female readers were encouraged by Astell to turn their attention away from their husbands to their own rationality instead. Although she shared a conservative position, Astell nevertheless extended female agency to women with her *Reflections*. Apart from stigmatising husbands who did not adequately fulfil their duties, she advised unmarried women to critically evaluate whether they really thought themselves fit enough to submit to such potentially disastrous living conditions. It is this option she offered to her female contemporaries to choose whether they want to be a wife and consequently submit to their husband, no matter how he behaves, or take the choice, instead, of not getting married and therefore spare themselves such submissions. Astell walked a thin line between her conservative royalist critique of Locke's ideas and a simultaneous critique from within of Filmer's royalist patriarchal position. Her *Reflections* was quite popular and went through five editions in her lifetime.

Astell's further publications also bear witness to her intense interest in political theory and her desire to take part in public debates. In 1704 she published three pamphlets on the question of Occasional Conformity. In them, she dealt with religious tolerance in discussing whether occasional attendance at Anglican services sufficed for civil servants as an adequate act of state loyalty. Her Tory publications were *Moderation Truly Stated* in which she argued against Dissent in general and against Dr. D'Avenant's *Essays upon Peace at Home and War Abroad* (1704) in specific. *A Fair Way with the Dissenters and their Patrons* appeared in response to Defoe's satire *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters* (1703) and, that same year, she published an analysis of the civil war and regicide of the seventeenth century entitled *An Impartial Enquiry into the Causes of Rebellion and Civil War in this Kingdom* (1704).²³ All of these works argued against Whiggish ideas and publications by James Owen, Daniel Defoe, and Bishop White Kennett.²⁴ As C. van Hartmann

Robert Filmer (1991), *Patriarcha and Other Writings*, edited by Johann P. Sommerville, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, p. xvi.

²³ For the last two publications see Patricia Springborg's edition of Mary Astell (1996), *Political Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²⁴ James Owen (1703), *Moderation a Vertue; Or, the Occasional Conformist Justify'd*

argues, "Mary Astell deserves recognition as a significant participant in the conservative opposition to the Whig ascendancy in the early eighteenth century."²⁵

In 1705 Astell published what she considered her magnum opus *The Christian Religion as Profess'd by a Daughter of the Church of England*, a rebuttal of *The Discourse Concerning the Love of God* (1695), which she mistakenly held to be Locke's work. The book had, in fact, been the intellectual achievement of Damaris Masham, who by this time had taken on Locke's position in the controversy. Locke lived with the Mashams in his later life until his death at Oates. Ironically, as we have seen, Masham had written *The Discourse* in answer to Astell and Norris' earlier collection of *Letters concerning the Love of God* (1695). After Astell response *The Christian Religion* appeared, Masham replied in turn with *Occasional Thoughts in Reference to a virtuous or Christian Life* (1705).²⁶ Astell's, often ignored, *Christian Religion* was a further attempt to convince her readership of female rationality and its employment, always related to religion.

Astell finally ended her writing career with *Bart'lemy Fair or an Enquiry after Wit* (1709), which referred to the late Earl of Shaftesbury – a Whig and mentor of John Locke – and his publication on the situation of a group of French Protestants known as the 'French Prophets' in London in his anonymously published *Letter Concerning Enthusiasm* (1708).²⁷ Seeking toleration in England, like forty or fifty thousand Huguenots already living in London, this group developed a kind of religious hysteria about ending the persecution of the Huguenots, which was regarded with suspicion even by the soundest English nonconformists. Shaftesbury

from the Imputation of Hypocrisy, London; Daniel Defoe (1703), *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters: Or Proposals for the Establishment of the Church*, London; White Kennett (1704), *A Compassionate Enquirey into the Causes of the Civil War: In a Sermon Preached in the Church of St. Botolph Aldgate, On January 31, 1704, the Day of the Fast or the Martyrdom of King Charles I*, London.

²⁵ C. Van Hartmann (1998), "Tory Feminism in Mary Astell's *Bart'lemy Fair*", in: *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, vol. 28, no.3 (Fall), p. 244.

²⁶ On the "three-cornered debate" between Astell, Masham and Locke see Patricia Springborg, "Astell, Masham, and Locke: religion and politics", in Hilda L. Smith (ed.) (1998), *Women writers of the early modern British political tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 105-125.

²⁷ On Astell's *Bart'lemy Fair* as a critique of Shaftesbury's *Letter Concerning Enthusiasm* see C. van Hartmann (1998), "Tory Feminism in Mary Astell's *Bart'lemy Fair*."

suggested in his *Letter* not to withdraw English Liberty but to expose them to ridicule, citing a puppet show performed at Batholomew Fair that had mocked the ‘French Prophets’. Astell was appalled by such ideas. Religion was certainly not to be approached with parody but only by a strict set of logical propositions to which the recognition of reason was central. Astell first thought Swift to be the author of the *Letter*, provoking his satiric retaliation in *The Tatler*.

Astell’s overall intention was to publicly oppose and attack contemporary trends of rising commercialisation: consumerism, religious tolerance, philosophical materialism and popular culture – values strongly supported by Whigs like the economically voracious Walpole government. Astell’s numerous publications on these contemporary issues won her a reputation for being a learned and serious scholar. Her books, especially her scholarly religious tracts, were admired for the quality of their argument. In his *The Sufferings of the Clergy* (1714), clergyman John Walker, even publicly thanked “the most ingenious Mrs. Astell” for inspiring him. Astell’s outstanding reputation was also grounded on the fact that a woman had achieved fame through learning. John Evelyn, a member of the Royal Society and intellectual contemporary of Astell, dedicated a (small) part of his book *Numismata. A Discourse of Medals, Ancient and Modern* (1697) to learned women – praising Astell specifically among them: “Nor without the highest Ingratitude for the Satisfaction I still receive by what I read of Madam Astalls [sic!] of the most Sublime” (p. 256). George Ballard, a Lady’s staymaker with an amateurish interest in history included Astell in his book *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain* (1752), a record of learned women of the seventeenth century. His information in Astell’s life originated from her contemporaries,²⁸ especially Elizabeth Elstob an Anglo-Saxon scholar who had known Astell for more than ten years.²⁹ Ballard explained how Astell was first known for her works on the rights and abilities of the fair sex, at the same time calling attention to the outstanding quality and earnest reception of her contributions on behalf of the Tories:

²⁸ Sarah Chapone, a bluestocking and friend of Richardson advised Ballard as well. She lent him her *Letters Concerning the Love of God* and recommended it as the most sublime work of Astell. See letter to George Ballard, 12. March 1742, Ballard MSS 43:132.

²⁹ On Elisabeth Elstob see Myra Reynolds (1920), *The Learned Lady in England 1650-1760*. Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin Company/The University Press Cambridge. pp. 169-185; and Ruth Perry (1986), *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, p. 25.

[O]bserving the pernicious artifices of the sectaries, she to her lasting honour, courageously and successfully attack'd them on all sides; and engaged the attention of the publick for a considerable time, with her productions; which were of excellent service in countermining the sly designs that were then very artfully carried on, in order to corrupt at present, and to subvert upon any proper opportunity, both church and state. Nor was she less serviceable to the church, in examining and confuting the doctrines of some, who pretending to be true sons thereof, were then introducing dangerous positions and tenets, derogatory to the honour of our blessed Saviour; as lessening his divinity, &c. (Ballard 1752, p. 451)

Astell was so highly regarded for her outstanding intelligence and knowledge, it almost seems as if her sex was unimportant. Yet, her status as a rational woman was so unique at the time that it did not free her from the normative expectations of society toward women in general. These two poles of Astell's identity, or rather her inability to fulfil the expectations of female decorum, are addressed in a letter from Dr. F. Atterbury, Bishop of Rochester, to Dr. Smaldrige:

There is not an expression that carries the least air of her sex from the beginning to the end of it. ... Had she had as much good breeding as good sense, she would be perfect; but she has not the most decent manner of insinuating what she means, but is now and then a little offensive and shocking in her expressions; which I wonder at, because a civil turn of words is what her sex is always mistress of. She, I think is wanting in it. (Ballard 1752, p. 452³⁰)

³⁰ Original source: Bayles's, *Great Historical Dictionary*, Article Norris.

As Ballard remarked, Astell was soon discovered to be the author of her books despite their anonymous publication:

For in a letter which I have seen, wrote by that great master of almost all learning, Dr. Hickes, to Dr. Charlett, master of university college in Oxford, dated Dec. 9, 1704, treating of other books of this sort, he adds, "And you may now assure your "self, that Mrs. Astell is the author of the other book against "*Occasional Communion*, which we justly admired so much" (Ballard, 1752, p. 452).³¹

John Evelyn maintained that Astell was the best proof for her argument for the rationality of woman: "[w]hat lately she has proposed to the Virtuous of her Sex, to show by her own Example, what great Things, and Excellencies it is Capable of" (*Numismata*, 1697, p. 256). Ballard similarly argued that Astell had tested out her instructions on herself and only then gave them to her readership: "[a]nd she did not prescribe religious rules, and duties to others, which she did not practise herself: her words and actions always comports with, and illustrating each other" (*Memoirs*, 1752, p. 455). Astell, too, emphasised her role as example in speaking to her female readership in her *Christian Religion* (1705): "I shall therefore presume so far on your Ladship's Patience, as to tell you what I think a Woman *ought* to Believe and Practice, and consequently what she *may*. That she may have it in Theory, is evident from a Woman's writing this;" (p. 3). Astell speaks here of only having rational ability 'in Theory', yet she knew too well that her reputation had convinced her readers that her abilities extended beyond theory to practice.

The main focus of Astell's activity was to pass on her own experience to her female contemporaries and, thereby, contribute to their advancement. She turned her own experience into a theoretical matrix for a female readership, offering a well-documented strategy of female empowerment. Astell created her own egalitarian intellectual position through the adaptation of her knowledge of Descartes' ideas, explicitly using his postulate of rational equality in extending it to herself as a woman.

³¹ Hickes also argued for the education of women. In a sermon of 1684 he strongly argued for the necessity of an education for girls and women. See George Hickes, *A Sermon Preached at the Church of St. Bridget, on Easter*. Hickes further translated Fenélon's work *L'education des filles* (1688) into English: François de Fenélon (1707), *Instructions for the Education of a Daughter*, London: Jonah Bowyer.

Astell went through an exceptional process of empowerment inspired by Cartesian thought which allowed her to assert herself intellectually among and against her male contemporaries. Having done so, Astell then transformed her own empowered position into different theoretical manuals to be taken on by other women.

Astell handed this empowerment strategy down to other women as a model of instruction. She did so in many different forms in her several works: *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694 & 1697), *Reflections* (1695) and *Christian Religion* (1705). To put it the other way round: the instructions given in those works to other women were Astell's own experiences worked out for her female readership as a theoretical matrix for their participation in a process of empowerment. Her life and work were so closely linked that no understanding of her objectives can take place without considering their mutual influence. This unique process of empowerment explains why Astell had been able to participate in public controversies through her publishing – a right reserved to men alone.

4.3. Astell's *Proposal* - Cartesian principles for the Ladies

Astell argued with force and commitment in the two parts of her *Proposal* for a transformation in the lives and condition of women. She employed Descartes' ideas as a philosophical basis to open up realms of change for her female contemporaries. With her *Proposal* she simultaneously reformed those realms by providing instructions for her female readership. As I have already suggested, Astell's *Proposal* and the instructions within it represent her own Cartesian experience of empowerment, which she passed on as a strategy theorised, elaborated and ready to be taken on to her female contemporaries.

In the two parts of the *Proposal* Astell employed different rhetorical strategies to address her readership. Most studies on Astell do not differentiate between the two parts of the treatise which are in fact two different publications with a two year gap. Those that do consider the difference of the first and second parts of the *Proposal* fail to consider the Cartesian influences in Astell's own life which constitute the matrix for this work.³² Though the final objective of both parts of the *Proposal* is the same, Astell changed her strategy after realising the first part had not led to the changes she sought to effect.

³² See for example Ruth Perry (1984), "Mary Astell's Response to the Enlightenment", in: Margaret Hunt / Margaret Jacob / Phyllis Mack / Ruth Perry (eds.) (1984), *Women and the Enlightenment*, New York: Institute for Research in History, pp. 13-40.

4.3.1 “*She who rightly understands wherein the perfection of her Nature consists, will lay out her Thoughts and Industry in the acquisition of such Perfections*” - Astell’s first *Proposal*

In 1694 Astell published *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*. Her intention was to bring about a general acknowledgement of female rationality. The *Proposal* was a demonstration of how extremely important this rationality was for women themselves and for the entire society. She, therefore, pleaded for the necessity of leading women out of the irrationality promoted by contemporary decorum, so destructive to character. To this end, she outlined the model of a convent-like institution, in which aristocratic women would be given the opportunity to concentrate on their minds alone and be educated. It was a utopian vision: these learned women would eventually swarm out into the world and pass on their knowledge of how to cultivate one’s mind to their sisters, infiltrating the world with the highest principles of virtue, which would inevitably lead to perfect Christian lives. This strategy would not only ensure the salvation of individual souls, she contended, but, through the contribution of rational women, improve the world substantially. The *Proposal* (*P. I*) was also addressed to potential supporters for this project.

Nevertheless, Astell challenged gender hierarchies by explaining in her *Proposal* that women with the help of their rational abilities were even capable of surpassing men. Directly addressing her female contemporaries, she argued for a re-conception of female beauty that would make it lasting and permanent and “place it out of the reach of Sickness and Old Age, by transferring it from a corruptible Body to an immortal Mind” (*P. I*, p. 5). She advised them to focus their concentration on the mind, instead of permanently focusing on bodily notions of beauty. This privileging of the mind over the body has its roots in Descartes, where it constitutes the central aspect of a Cartesian dualism, which Astell adapted for her own argument in reforming the position of women in society. In taking over Descartes’ dualism, Astell at the same time implied his hierarchical order, in arguing that the mind was superior to the body. Her appropriation of Cartesian dualistic logic was applied to construct a different perspective of women and thereby extended the realms of female agency.

Having made the claim, based on her understanding of Cartesian thought, that women possess equal rational ability, Astell then asked, if women were equally rational to their male contemporaries, why was it then that they were men's intellectual inferiors? Her answer to this question was complex. Here she primarily addressed her male contemporaries, who were to be blamed for producing the circumstances, "deny[ing] us the means of improvements" (*P. I*, p. 9). By "means of improvements" Astell meant the cultivation of those abilities and an adequate female education – this too, has its roots in Cartesian logic. Although the individual possesses rational abilities, they must first be cultivated to be of good use. On this basis Astell spun out a chain of logical consequences. Like Descartes she argued that rational abilities were of divine origin, which obliged individuals to cultivate and choose in which direction to develop this potential. Women were therefore, according to Astell, obliged to cultivate their *ratio*. In her view God had not given women rationality to see them ignorant, but had intended them to use this rationality for their understanding of him.

For since GOD has given Women as well as Men intelligent Souls, why should they be forbidden to improve them? Since he has not denied us the faculty of Thinking, why shou'd we not (at least in gratitude to him) employ our thoughts on himself their noblest Object, and not unworthily bestow them on Trifles and Gaities and secular Affairs? Being the Soul was created for the contemplation of Truth as well as for the fruition of Good, is it not as cruel and unjust to preclude Women from the knowledge of the one, as well as from the enjoyment of the other? (*P. I*, 1694, p. 22)

Astell further approached the subject from another side in arguing that if female rationality was not cultivated it could diminish and even disappear:

And as Exercise enlarges and exalts any Faculty, so thro' want of using, it becomes cramped and lessened; if therefore we make little or no use of our Understandings, we shall shortly have none to use; and the more contracted, and unemploy'd the deliberating and directive Power is, the more liable is the elective to unworthy and mischievous options. (*P. I*, p. 23)

The cultivation of female rationality was thus directly connected with the moral condition of society. Only a cultivated rationality was of use according to Astell. For those who opposed this concept she added that only when women were given the chance to cultivate their rational abilities could it be proven to exist:

Let such therefore as deny us the improvement of our Intellectuals, either take up *his* Paradox, who said, *That Women have no Souls*; which at this time a day, when they are allow'd to Brutes, wou'd be as unphilosophical as it is unmannerly; or else let them permit us to cultivate and improve them. (*P. I*, p. 23)

Daniel Garber's cogent analysis of Descartes demonstrates that his aim was indeed a pedagogical reform, shifting the focus away from a learned authority to the cultivation of the individual's own rational abilities as a source, to discover truth.

True knowledge thus can come neither from teacher nor from tradition. This has obvious consequences for Descartes's conception of education. True education, then, must involve not the transfer of information, doctrine, or dogma, but simply the cultivation of the intellect.³³

Although Descartes demanded pedagogical reform with his directive to cultivate the rational abilities first, he did not reject the idea of institutional education in general. With his programme he moreover demanded qualitative reformation. In the introduction to his French version of the *Principles of Philosophy* (1647) Descartes was explicit about how one ought to learn philosophy. In his *Discourse* he suggested mathematics to exercise one's rational abilities, a field of study in which there is but one correct answer and which thereby leads the mind to unified truth.³⁴ It was thus the cultivation of the intellect, which Astell readily took over for her argument of female rationality.

³³ Daniel Garber, "Descartes, or the Cultivation of the Intellect", in: Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (1998) (ed.), *Philosophers on Education*, London: Routledge, pp. 124-137.

³⁴ See René Descartes (1649), *Discourse*, p. 31. "But considering, that amongst all those who formerly have sought the Truth in Learning, none but the Mathematicians only could finde any demonstrations, that's to say, any certain and evident reasons. I doubted not, but that it was by the same that they have examin'd; although I did hope for no other profit, but only that they would accustome my Minde to nourish it self with Truths, and not content it self with false Reasons."

Astell's claim that rationality always implied the necessity to cultivate it made her demand education for women. In fact, she often used her argument for women's equal rationality and for female education synonymously. But Astell was nowhere explicit about what exactly should be taught in her proposed seminary. She recommended that her female contemporaries read French philosophers (*P. I*, p. 24) but outlined no conventional curriculum. In a second step, however, she made it clear that the central focus of her plan was the activation of female rational abilities and adequate instructions on how to make use of this potential. She wanted to pursue this aim by offering women space away from worldly distractions where they could sharpen their awareness of the importance of an active rational potential. Still, it can be argued that Astell envisioned an alternative curriculum of sorts in her *Proposal* which consisted of an alternative female teaching and learning process.

Like Descartes Astell believed rationality to be connected to divine truth. If directed correctly, female understanding would inevitably also be led to truth. Empowered by this thesis, women were now able to understand themselves as intellectual self-sufficient beings once they understood how to activate this rational potential. Astell's Cartesian understanding of rationality therefore implied a specific concept of learning, which she extended to women. It made female learning independent of the exclusively male world of learning and thereby rejected the common male dismissal of rational woman.

What Descartes and Astell shared was the notion of empowering the self, freeing it from external authority and granting it the power to seek truth independently. This had consequences for the process of teaching as well. Descartes made clear in his *Discourse* that truth was not his alone, but accessible to all who pursue it. He made himself an object of study and invited others to contribute to this process. Astell, in like manner, did not position herself as a teacher of absolute knowledge, but invited her (female) readers to participate in her own experience and its theoretical outcome.

In her social analysis, Astell sought to understand why women were perceived in society as intellectually inferior to men. Why were women not accepted as rational and why were they still excluded from an education which acknowledged their rational abilities? Why had those mistakes not long been mended? Here, she turned to Descartes' notion of custom. In his *Discourse*, Descartes scrutinised accepted truth with his universal doubt which Astell took up as a strategy for her own thinking to question tradition. Social practices as the understanding that women are irrational were in her perspective not the result of a rational process but exclusively driven by unquestioned custom. Because this social practice had always been believed true it is blindly followed. For Astell this was the root of all evil in society.

'Tis Custom therefore, that Tyrant Custom, which is the grand motive to all those irrational choices which we daily see made in the World, so very contrary to our *present* interest and pleasure, as well as to our Future. (*P. I*, p. 15)

Custom, Astell reasoned, was responsible for women's exclusion from education: Women were considered irrational and therefore kept away from education – a perception which had become common belief. Without ever having been proven, this belief was perpetuated, one generation after another.

Astell's vision was to free her female contemporaries from the negative effects of custom. The convent outlined in her *Proposal* was planned as the beginning of a general change of society. It was designed to grant women space free from custom, in which they could freely develop their rational faculties without suffering from false assumptions.

Therefore, one great end of this institution, shall be to expel that cloud of Ignorance, which Custom has involv'd us in, to furnish our minds with a stock of solid and useful Knowledge, that the Souls of Women may no longer be the only unadorn'd and neglected things. (*P. I*, p. 21)

Astell's inner belief was that women were not ignorant by nature, but made so by circumstances deriving from custom. Astell forcefully argued that,

[T]he Incapacity [of women], if there be any, is acquired not natural ... The Cause therefore of the defects we labour under, is, if not wholly, yet at least in the first place, to be ascribed to the mistakes of our Education; which like an Error in the first Concoction, spreads its ill Influence through all our Lives. (*P. I*, p. 10)

Astell asserted that this acquired female ignorance must be eliminated for the good of all. She went on to scrutinise the belief in the intellectual superiority of men over women, concluding that it was entirely the result of male privilege to be allowed to concentrate on the cultivation of their rational abilities. Astell challenged this custom by offering the alternative scenario of a world in which men were denied the means to improve their minds:

Were the Men as much neglected, and as little care taken to cultivate and improve them, perhaps they wou'd be so far from surpassing those whom they now dispise, that they themselves wou'd sink into the greatest stupidity and brutality. (*P. I*, p. 9)

Astell addressed her *Proposal* to men also with the intention of illustrating how they contributed to the production of irrational women. But she equally addressed her female readership to argue that by accepting their status as irrational and submitting to an education that ignored their rational abilities, they too participated in creating their condition. She sought to inspire her female readers to actively question custom and search for alternatives:

We think it an unpardonable mistake not to do as our neighbours do, and part with our Peace and Pleasure as well as our Innocence and Vertue, meerly in compliance with an unreasonable Fashion. And having inur'd ourselves to Folly, we know not how to quit it; we go on in Vice, not because we find satisfaction in it, but because we are unacquainted with the Joys of Virtue. (*P. I*, S. 15)

Yet, Astell did not chastise her female readership for succumbing to such powerful forces as tradition and custom; instead, she sought to make them aware of the abilities that lie within them yet untapped. Her aim was a sort of consciousness-raising, as it were, for which she adapted a twofold rhetorical strategy. On the one hand, she placed emphasis on her own identity as a woman, hence, similar to the gender identity of her readers. Though this may seem commonplace to us, for a woman to draw attention to shared social experience as a source of (group) identification was a recent phenomenon in late seventeenth-century England.³⁵ Expressing empathy with the woman reader, understanding her difficulties as those she herself had to face, Astell often used the pronoun 'we'. In doing so, she called attention to the obstacles in their path toward activating their rational abilities were a general phenomenon in the way of almost all women of her status:

But if our Nature is spoil'd, instead of being improv'd at first; if from our Infancy we are nurs'd up in Ignorance and Vanity; are taught to be Proud and Petulent, Delicate and Fantastick, Humorous and Inconstant, 'tis not strange that the ill effects of this Conduct appear in all the future Actions of our Lives. (*P. I*, p. 11)

Astell's identification with contemporary women must be qualified by her clear awareness of social status. Astell's words leave no doubt for whom she wrote: her words were addressed to Ladies of quality and the daughters of the aristocracy – and of whom she expected 500 pounds each to be paid as an entrance fee to her educational institution. Still, she did not ignore the girls and women of lower rank.³⁶ In 1709, with the financial support from her highborn friends, Astell opened a school for the daughters of the Chelsea veterans. Their curriculum did not resemble that of their aristocratic female contemporaries but was more vocational since this clientele was to be prepared for work to provide a livelihood.

³⁵ Hilda Smith (1982), *Reason's Disciples. Seventeenth-Century English Feminists*. Urbana & London: University of Illinois Press, p. 4. I do agree with Smith that women started to identify with other women as a sociological group. This can however not be taken as a general link. Astell for instance was far from identifying with all women's "social and political position". I therefore think that Smith's claim that women like Astell were the first group of modern 'feminists' is historically not correct.

³⁶ See in this context Ruth Perry's essay on the complex question whether Astell was an enlightenment thinker. Ruth Perry (1984), "Mary Astell's Response to the Enlightenment, pp. 13-40.

Astell's rhetorical identification with her female readership, at once, set her up as model, as a woman who had already undergone the process she described and advocated. The *Proposal* is itself a demonstration of female rationality and the realistic potential to put its instructions to practice – her language is rational, structured and clear. This position of experience, in turn, gave Astell the personal authority to correct the behaviour of other women who had not yet recognized their rational potential:

Pardon me the seeming rudeness of this Proposal, which goes upon a supposition that there is something amiss in you, which it is intended to amend. My design is not to expose, but to rectify your Failures. To be exempt from mistake, is a privilege few can pretend to, the greatest is to be past Conviction, and too obstinate to reform. (*P. I*, p. 8)

Again Astell was careful not to jeopardise the identification she had built up with her readers, pointing out the folly of perceiving oneself as “exempt from mistake”. She assumed the position of equal, as a friend who wanted other women to profit from her own advanced experience:

My earnest desire is, That you Ladies, would be as perfect and happy as 'tis possible to be in this imperfect state; for I Love you too well to endure a spot upon your Beauties, if I can by any means remove and wipe it off. (*P. I*, p. 7)

She did not condemn women who were “content to be in the World like Tulips in a Garden, to make a fine shew and be good for nothing” (*P. I*, p. 7). Her motivation was to open her female reader's eyes to their great potential and to the prospect of a more satisfying destiny. The enormous support Astell extended in her unconditional empathy for her female contemporaries might well be traced back to Katherine Philips' (1631-1664) notion of female friendship. Philips invented a new genre of literature with her eulogy on her female friends.³⁷ Astell certainly knew Philips' works, mentioning Orinda in her *Proposal* as an example of a woman who had earned fame

³⁷ See Edmund Gosse (1914), “The Matchless Orinda”, in *Seventeenth-Century Studies*, London: William Heinemann, pp. 229-258.

through her intellectual potential.³⁸ Not only did Astell speak to her female readers as a true friend, she also praised such relationships by espousing their necessity:

For she who possesses a worthy Person, had certainly obtain'd (36) the richest Treasure! A Blessing that Monarchs may envy, and she who enjoys is happier than she who fills a Throne! A Blessing, which next to the love of GOD is the choicest Jewel in our Celestial Diadem, which, were it duly practic'd, wou'd both fit us for heav'n, and bring it down into our hearts whilst we tarry here. For Friendship is a Vertue which comprehends all the rest; none being fit for this, who is not adorn'd with every other Vertue. (*P. I*, p. 35/36)

Astell here pointed to her own position as literary female friend, supporting her female readers rationally:

But I intend by it the greatest usefulness, the most refin'd and disinterest'd Benevolence, a love that thinks nothing within the bounds of Power and Duty, too much to do or suffer for its Beloved; And makes no distinction betwixt its Friend and it self, (37) except that in Temporals it prefers her interest. (*P. I*, p. 36/37)

She continued, "The truest effect of love being to endeavour the bettering of the beloved Person" (*P. I*, p. 37). There could be no better description of Astell's motivation to pursue a life-long effort to convince her female contemporaries of their divine rational abilities and thereby ensuring their good life in the next world.

But let us return, for a moment, to the religious aspects of Astell's *Proposal*, for, as we have seen, the focus of her attention on female rationality took place entirely within the framework of religious destiny. She wrote:

We have hitherto consider'd our Retirement only in relation to Religion, which is indeed its main, I may say its only design ... since Religion is the adequate business of our lives, and largely consider'd, takes in all we have to do; (*P. I*, p. 21)

³⁸ See *Proposal I*, p. 7.

It was Astell's contention that rationality was absolutely necessary in order to practise religion adequately, an attitude coincident with broader developments in England, which sought the unification of reason and religion. As John Spurr has argued, Restoration England experienced a "cry for rational religion" due to its "fascination by reason and rationality".³⁹ Unfortunately, Spurr does not consider the important influence of Descartes' philosophy on England in this period readily visible in Astell's case. Astell clearly adapted a Cartesian notion of rationality and made it the focus of her understanding of religion. Yet, while Descartes had proved God's existence with his notion of rationality, he did not discuss the notion of faith. Astell took over Descartes' concept of rationality but instead of arguing for a change in natural philosophy, she argued for change in the practise of religion. For Astell religion was only approached adequately when rationally grasped. In her *Proposal*, she explained that women who were simply following the duties of religion were easily threatened with temptation and thus carried within them a heretical potential. This instability, Astell argued, resulted from the denial of women's rational faculty. The *Proposal* illustrates the difference between a woman who simply follows religious rules and one who uses her reason to understand religious practice:

She is, it may be, taught the Principles and Duties of Religion, but not Acquainted with the Reasons and Grounds of them; being told 'tis enough for her to believe, to examine why, and wherefore, belongs not to her. And therefore, though her Piety may be tall and spreading, yet because it wants foundation and Root, the first rude Temptation overthrows and blasts it, or perhaps the short liv'd Gourd decays and withers of its own accord. But why should she be blamed for setting no great value on her Soul, whose noblest Faculty her Understanding is render'd useless to her? (*P. I*, p. 16)

Astell created a vision of a rational woman whose understanding had been developed and who was thus able to fully understand and therefore adequately practise religion.

³⁹ John Spurr, (1988) "'Rational Religion' in Restoration England", in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 49, Issue 4, (Oct-Dec), pp. 563-585.

Whereas she whose Reason is suffer'd to display it self, to inquire into the grounds and Motives of Religion, to make a disquisition of its Graces, and search out its hidden Beauties; who is a Christian out of Choice, not in conformity to those about her; and cleaves to Piety because 'tis her Wisdom, her Interest, her Joy, not because she has been accustom'd to it; she who is not only eminently and unmoveably good, but able to give a Reason *why* she is so; is too firm and stable to be mov'd by the pitiful Allurements of sin, too wise and too well bottom'd to be undermined and supplanted by the strongest Efforts of Temptation. (*P. I*, p. 16)

Religion practised rationally removes the threat of heresy – this conviction, which Astell held throughout her life, constitutes a central part of her second *Proposal* (1697) as well as her final publication *Christian Religion* (1705). As guide to the soul, cultivated rationality, moreover, ensured a moral life. Rationality applied correctly was the force to move the *will* in toward the 'good' – influencing the individual to lead a truly Christian life. Her notion of *will* guided by right understanding, which she addressed in the second part of the *Proposal*, was strongly rooted in Cartesianism, as we shall later see.

Astell's work asserted her political right to play an active role in contemporary social developments. Her vision was to direct society away from recent trends: the impact of new capitalism, consumerism and its consequent dehumanisation and inequality, toward which she saw Whig liberalism leading. She wanted men and women to concentrate on being good Christians, and her *Proposal* was designed to initiate the changes necessary to achieve such a moral turn. Permitting aristocratic women to concentrate on their rational potential was only part of a bigger vision. While the convent itself was to be an isolated domain, its ultimate purpose was social: to return educated women to society for the purpose of instructing their sisters outside:

It [the convent] shall not so cut you off from the world as to hinder you from bettering and improving it, but rather qualify you to do it the greatest Good, and be a Seminary to stock the Kingdom with pious and prudent Ladies; whose good Example it is to be hop'd, will so influence the rest of their Sex, that Women may no longer pass for those little useless and impertinent Animals, which the ill conduct of too many has caus'd them to be mistaken for. (*P. I*, p. 21)

In Astell's vision these intellectually cultivated women would eventually swarm out like missionaries and infiltrate society to its betterment, leading to a worldly paradise:

And then what a blessed World shou'd we have, shining with so many stars of Vertue! Who, not content to be happy themselves, for that's a narrowness of mind too much beneath their God-like temper, would like the glorious Lights of Heav'n, or rather like him who made them, diffuse their benign Influences round about. Having gain'd an entrance into Paradise themselves, they wou'd both shew the way, and invite all others to partake of their felicity. (*P. I*, p. 38)

Although Astell's demands may appear progressive to the modern reader, it must be remembered that her intentions were not to destroy social hierarchies with her programme. She, moreover, strongly qualified her demands and thereby demonstrated to which political arena she belonged.

We pretend not that Women shou'd teach in the Church, or usurp (24) Authority where it is not allow'd them; permit us only to understand our *own* duty, and not be forc'd to take it upon trust from others; to be at least so far learned, as to be able to form in our minds a true Idea of Christianity, it being so very necessary to fence us against the danger of these *last* and *perilous* days, in which Deceivers a part of whose Character is, to lead captive *silly Women*, need not creep *into Houses* since they have Authority to proclaim their Errors on the *House top*. (*P. I*, p. 23-24)

Her qualifications had the rhetorical function of appeasing the fears of men threatened by a female rationality employed as a social force, and further stress their use for the common good of men and women. Yet, Astell may also have been caught in the web of her own thread of logic, so that the conflicts between her desire to empower women and her conservative politics rise to the surface. She saw herself as an observer and critic of society, who saw in her female contemporaries an untapped capacity for social change. Unwittingly, her conservative arguments, as can be seen from an historical perspective, introduced progressive ideas, which pushed the boundaries of conservative thought.

Astell's first *Proposal* was tremendously successful, going through five editions by 1701.⁴⁰ In the end, however, she was unable to raise the necessary financial support to found her women's college. Though, according to George Ballard's account, one aristocratic Lady was prepared to donate no less than £10.000 for the project.⁴¹ Ruth Perry has identified the generous Lady as either Astell's close high-aristocratic friend Lady Betty Hastings or Queen Anne.⁴² But when Bishop Burnet voiced his suspicions about the Catholic character of the project, "preparing a way for *Popish Orders*", potential donators were scared away. As George Ballard described:

Nay, the scheme given in her proposal, seemed so reasonable, and wrought so far upon a certain great lady, that she designed to give ten thousand pounds towards erecting a sort of college for the education and improvement of the female sex: and as a retreat for these ladies who nauseating the parade of the world, might here find a happy rescess from the noise and hurry of it. But this design coming to the ears of Bishop Burnet, he immediately went to that Lady, and so powerfully remonstrated against it, telling her it would look like preparing a way for *Popish Orders*, that it would be reputed a *Nunnery*, &c. that he utterly frustrated that noble design. (p. 446)

⁴⁰ Ruth Perry (1986), *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, p. 103. Perry explains the massive interest in Astell's work with a general interest in the education of women, which had only just emerged.

⁴¹ George Ballard (1752), *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain*, p. 446.

⁴² Ruth Perry (1986), *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, p. 244.

Though Astell did not succeed in founding an educational seminary for women she never gave up her vision, turning to other possibilities to convince her contemporaries in her second *Proposal*.

4.3.2. “I shall not send you further than your Own Minds” - Astell’s second *Proposal*

Despite the positive reception of Astell’s first *Proposal*, its ideas had not been realised. Disappointed but determined, Astell decided to change her strategy and try again. She wrote a second *Proposal* (1697) (*P. II*) arguing for the rationality of women and insisting still on the necessity of founding an educational institution for women, but offered too a new concept for the cultivation of women’s minds. It is the methodological difference which characterizes the two parts of the *Proposal*. Astell understood the second as “a farther Perswasive to the LADIES To endeavour the Improvement of their Minds” (*P. II*, p. 71). Analysing the shortfalls of her first argument, Astell criticised the original presentation of her educational concept, or, better said, her lack thereof:

But because this was only propos’d in general, and the particular method of effecting it left to the Discretion of those who shou’d Govern and Manage the Seminary, without which we are still of Opinion that the Interest of the Ladies can’t be duly serv’d [yet] in the mean time till that can be erected and that nothing in our power may be wanting to do them service, we shall (79) attempt to lay down in this second part some more minute Directions, and such as we hope if attended to may be of use to them. (*P. II*, p. 78/79)

The second part of the *Proposal*, entitled *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part II, Wherein a Method is offer’d for the Improvement of the Minds*, turned directly to Astell’s female readers to convince them to practise themselves what she initially proposed be carried out by the educational institution set out in the first part. She presented, here, a manual to instruct her female readership in how to cultivate and develop their own rational potential. It was the women themselves Astell trusted this time to realise her vision auto-didactically.

The second *Proposal* offered instructions for learning which covered a whole catalogue of issues, spanning from the question of the importance of cultivating female rationality to direct guidelines for learning how to develop rationality, through to support for the emotional consequences. The argument of Astell's second *Proposal* was thus more explicit. As Ruth Perry explains, "since no one had followed her suggestion to institute schools in which women could train their minds, she thought it incumbent upon her to write a manual for thinking, a kind of 'how-to-do-it' book to be used at home, for those who wanted to improve their natural reasoning capacities".⁴³ Though Perry briefly acknowledges Astell's change in argumentative strategy, she does not examine the roots of this new method, which must be traced to Cartesian thought.

Astell took on a much more challenging tone in her second *Proposal*. She argued that the feasibility of her project had been already demonstrated by turning to her female readers: "For tho I desire your improvement never so passionately, tho I shou'd have prov'd it feasible with the clearest Demonstration, and most proper for you to set about;" (*P. II*, p. 73). This demonstration, whether through the content of the first *Proposal* or the example of her life and work, was offered as proof that her readers had nothing to lose. Motivation was the key objective for Astell in directly addressing her female readers.

Right from the beginning, Astell tried to motivate her female readership to follow her principles without hesitation: "Why won't you begin to think, and no longer dream away your Time in a wretched incogitancy?" (*P. II*, p. 72). She advised her female readers to use her book as a direct manual to be carried out during the very act of reading it:

⁴³ Ruth Perry (1984), "Mary Astell's Response to the Enlightenment", pp. 13-40.

[A]nd the best Commendation you can bestow on a Book is immediately to put it in Practice; otherwise you become self-condemn'd, your Judgement reproaches your Actions, and you live a contradiction to your selves. If you *approve*, Why don't you *follow*? And if you *Wish*, Why shou'd you not *Endeavour*? Especially since that wou'd reduce your Wishes to Act, and make you of Well-wishers to Vertue and Good sense, become glorious Examples of them. (*P. II*, p. 72)

In the second *Proposal* Astell developed her use of Descartes' theories in arguing that the possession of rationality in itself did not suffice – what mattered was how this potential was put to use. Descartes wrote in his *Discourse*: “For ‘tis not enough to have good faculties, but the principal is, to apply them well” (*Discourse*, p. 3). Astell's understanding was strongly based on Descartes' dualism. With his body-mind-split he had placed the mind in superiority to the body and, as a consequence, a distinction was drawn between rational individuals and irrational creatures. Astell used this widely accepted asymmetry of beings to argue that to be identified as rational, one must also fulfil certain duties.

Astell identified two characteristics of rational creatures and contrasted them to the inferiority of irrational creatures. Her first point was that a rational being makes decisions and is thereby a “Voluntary Agent” responsible for those choices. The second was that the will of the individual must be determined by reason:

Because as Irrational Creatures act only by the Will of him who made them, and according to the Power of that Mechanisme by which they are form'd, so every one who pretends to Reason, who is a Voluntary Agent and therefore Worthy of Praise or Blame, Reward or Punishment, must *Chuse* his Actions and determine his Will to that Choice by some Reasonings or Principles either true or false, and in proportion to this Principles and the Consequences he deduces from them he is to be accounted, if they are Right and Conclusive a Wise Man, if Evil, Rash and Injudicious a Fool. (*P. II*, p. 82)

Astell's initial attitude of empathy in the second *Proposal* was replaced with a challenging instructive tone in addressing her female contemporaries to take seriously the responsibilities attendant to their status as rational beings and to take an active role in shaping the conditions of their lives, lest they should themselves lay stones in their path. Having already addressed this phenomenon in the first *Proposal*, illustrating the way women actively took part in practicing custom, preventing them from a rational practice, she now offered an even more detailed analysis to challenge her female contemporaries. Rationality gave women the right to make choices, she argued, and with choice comes responsibility for oneself – even if those choices are the result of unreflected custom: „and that if you allow them [men] the preference in Ingenuity, it is not because you *must* but because you *will*” (*P. II*, p. 72). Astell's increasingly less gentle reproach was intended to wake the minds of her contemporaries. Yet, again, the subversive notion of women bearing responsibility for their own thoughts and actions remained contained within a purely philosophical context. Ultimately, women's new-found agency was to be exercised within the bounds of traditional, God-given roles they would then fulfil to perfection.

For Astell, those claiming rationality must necessarily determine their will. Her notion of will was also deeply rooted in Cartesianism. Descartes maintained that the power of the will often preceded that of the mind.⁴⁴ Astell took up Descartes' notion of will in her own understanding: “Indeed our power of Willing exerts it self much sooner than that Rational Faculty which is to Govern it, and therefore t'will either be left to its own range, or to the Reason of another to direct it” (*P. II*, p. 83). She thus concluded in good Cartesian fashion that only when reason was applied correctly was it possible to direct the will accordingly. “[W]e shall first apply our selves to the Understanding, endeavouring to inform and put it right, and in the next place address to the Will” (*P. II*, p. 84). For Astell, a will uncontrolled by reason was the primary source of all vice and evil - a will influenced through rationality in contrast a guarantee for virtue. She wrote:

⁴⁴ “Latius pateat voluntas quam intellectus.” In: René Descartes (1664), *Meditationes De Prima Philosophia. In quibus Dei existentia, & animae humanae a corpore distinctio, demonstrantur*. Londoni: Excudebat J.F. (John Fletcher) pro Jona Hart.

And the best way that I can think of to Improve the Understanding, and to guard it against all Errors proceed they from what Cause they may, is to regulate the Will, whose Offense it is to determine the Understanding to such and such Ideas and to stay it in the Consideration of them so long as is necessary to the Discovery of Truth; for if the Will be right the Understanding can't be guilty of any Culpable Error. Not to Judge of any thing which we don't Apprehend, to suspend our Assent till we see just cause to give it, and to determine nothing till the Strength and Clearness of the Evidence oblige us to it. (*P. II*, p. 115).

Here, the echoes of Descartes are clearly audible: "for as much as our Will inclining it self to follow, or fly nothing but what our Understanding proposeth good or ill, to judge well is sufficient to do well, and to judge the best we can, to do also what's best;" (*Discourse*, p. 45).⁴⁵ Astell had, however, taken up Descartes' notion of will with a different intention. The fundamental distinction between rational individual and irrational creature was used by Astell with an intention to demonstrate the necessary implications of a rational way of life. She was very clear about the terms under which an individual could only be granted the status of rational individual – an explanation of instructive quality addressed to women:

If then it be the property of Rational Creatures and Essential to their very Natures to Chuse their Actions, and to determine their Wills to that Choice by such Principles and Reasonings as their Understandings are furnish'd with, they who are desirous to be rank'd in that Order of Beings must conduct their Lives by these Measures, begin with their Intellectuals, inform themselves what are the plain and first Principles of Action and Act accordingly. (*P II*, p. 82)

Astell's insistence on the duties of rational beings led directly to her promotion of learning. Learning was in her opinion the ultimate tool for women and there was no potential for advancement without it. Although Astell initially argued that the individual

⁴⁵ It should be acknowledged that Descartes did not use a unified notion of will throughout the production of his works. The concept of will which is here referred to can only be claimed for the *Discourse*. On Descartes' variations of will see Anthony Kenny (1998), "Descartes and the Will", in: John Cottingham (ed.), *Descartes*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 132-159.

already differed from the irrational creature through its rational potential, she now turned her argument upside down in claiming that “the first light of our Understanding must be borrow’d” (*P II*, p. 82) and is not entirely due to a rational potential:

By which it appears that there are some degrees of Knowledge necessary before there can be *any* Human Acts, for till we are capable of Chusing our own Actions and directing them by some Principles, tho we Move and Speak and so many such like things, we live not the Life of a Rational Creature but only of an Animal. (*P. II*, p. 82)

Astell also turned to those who rejected learning and made clear how they were themselves responsible for this misfortune:

But let me intreat them to consider that there’s no Ignorance so shameful, no Folly so absurd as that which refuses Instruction, be it upon what account it may. All good Persons will pity not upbraid their former unhappiness, as not being their own but other Peoples fault; whereas they themselves are responsible if they continue it, since that’s an Evidence that they are silly and despicable, not because they *cou’d* not, but because they *wou’d* not be better Informed. (*P. II*, p. 77)

Astell pointed here to her *Proposal* as a direct means of instruction to help her female readers throw off their bad habits and advance themselves to a better life. The central part of this programme was to continuously define what the ultimate task of the individual – man or woman – must be:

We are not made for our selves, nor was it ever design’d we shou’d be ador’d and idoliz’d by one another. Our faculties were given us for Use not Ostensation, not to make a noise in the World, but to be serviceable in it, to declare the Wisdom, Power and Goodness, of that All-Perfect Being from whom we derive *All* our Excellencies, and in whose (97) Service, they ought *Wholly* to be employ’d. (*P. II*, p. 97)

She thus left no doubt in her second *Proposal* either about what she considered the ultimate purpose of our existence: the ‘Right’ understanding of God. The *Proposal* must therefore be understood as a manual for teaching its female readership how best to ensure the salvation of their souls:

We have no better way of finding out the true End of any thing, than by observing to what Use it is most adapted. Now the Art of *Well-Living*, the Study of the Divine Will and Law, that so we may be Conformable to it in all things, is what we're peculiarly fitted for and destin't to, what ever has not such a Tendency, either Directly or at least Remotely, is besides the purpose. Rational Studies therefore next to GOD's Word bid fairest for our Choice, because they best answer the Design above mention'd. (*P. II*, p. 97)

"Rational studies", then, were perceived as instruments to sharpen the understanding of God. Knowledge was not enjoyed for its own sake but only

[w]hen it enlarges the Capacity of our Minds, gives us nobler ideas of the Majesty, the Grandeur and Glorious Attributes of our adorable Creator, Regulates our Wills and makes us more capable of Imitating and Enjoying him, 'tis then a truly sublime thing, a worthy Object of our Industry: And she who does not make this the End of her Study, spends her Time and Pains to no purpose or to an ill one. (*P. II*, p. 97)

Part of Astell's strategy to overcome what she saw as negative social trends was to penetrate the understanding of truth. Here, Astell even referenced Descartes directly, referring to him as a "Celebrated Author".⁴⁶ Descartes had claimed that "those things which we conceive clearly and distinctly, are all true;" (*Discourse*, p. 53) rejecting conventional notions of truth as prejudices. Astell recommended a similar practice to her female readership:

The First Principal thing therefore to be observed in all the Operations of the Mind is, That we determine nothing about those things of which we have not a Clear Idea, and as Distinct as the Nature of the Subject will permit, for we cannot properly be said to Know any thing which does not Clearly and Evidently appear to us. (*P. II*, p. 122)

⁴⁶ Note that the attribution to Descartes by mentioning his name fully is omitted from the extract reproduced in *The Ladies Library* (1714), vol. 1, p. 490.

It was reason she identified as the primary ability to discover truth, and Astell urged her readers to penetrate their perception of truth thoroughly to avoid prejudices:

Reason wills that we shou'd think again, and not form our Conclusions or fix our foot till we can honestly say, that we have with our Prejudice or Prepossession view'd the matter in Debate on all sides, seen it in every light, have no bias to encline us either way, but are only determined by Truth, it self, shining brightly in our eyes, and not permitting us to resist the force and Evidence it carries. (*P. II*, p. 90)

Astell had taken over Descartes' prioritisation of the mind and made explicit in her adaptation what this mind alone was capable of. Looking specifically at the educational situation of women, she argued that not the study of famous authors mattered but that reason, existing in every individual was in itself a sufficient guide to discover truth. She wrote, "since we are not oblig'd to tumble over many Authors, to hunt after a very celebrated Genius, but may have it for enquiring after in our own Breasts, are we not inexcusable if we don't obtain it" (*P. II*, p. 118). Astell's attempt to motivate her female readership to make use of their rational abilities by arguing that they carried this knowledge in their "own Breasts" strongly relied on Descartes' Platonic notion of innate ideas.

Descartes believed that the individual was equipped with innate ideas of divine origin, which were representations of worldly objects. As Charles Taylor explains, Descartes thus transposed the moral source from outside the individual to inside,⁴⁷ turning away from the authority of schools over the individual's knowledge. As we have seen, Astell used Descartes' rejection of educational institutions for her purposes, freeing herself and her female contemporaries from the restrictions educational institutions presented for women. Reason was all that mattered and by defining women as rational Astell extended the Cartesian independent learning process to include her female contemporaries. She wrote:

⁴⁷ Charles Taylor (1989), *The Sources of the Self*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 144.

[Y]ou may if you please take in the assistance of some well chosen book, but a good Natural Reason after all, is the best Director, without this you will scarce Argue well, tho you had the Choicest Books and Tutors to Instruct you, but with it you may, tho' you happen to be destitute of the other. (*P. II*, p. 117)

Astell even went so far as to claim that the unlearned were more successful in such a process, since education would not hinder the potential of their natural rationality. Here, Astell borrowed the words of Arnauld, a French philosopher strongly influenced by Descartes, referring his *Logic, or the Art of Thinking*⁴⁸ to argue about rational capacities: "These Operations [of the Mind] proceed merely from Nature, and that sometimes more perfectly from those who are altogether ignorant of Logic, than from others who have learn'd it" (*P. II*, p. 117). The passage contains echoes of Poullain de La Barre's *The Woman as Good as the Man: Or Equality of Both Sexes* in which he makes a very similar argument that women were even more capable of rationality than their male contemporaries as their rational capacities had not been blocked by useless education, but we do not know if Astell had read his text.⁴⁹ In any case, for Astell, all individuals, including women, were capable of enlightenment through their 'inner teacher':

Indeed it seems to me most Reasonable and most agreeable to the Wisdom and Equity of the Divine Operations, that every one shou'd have a Teacher in their own Bosoms, who will if they seriously apply themselves to him, immediately Enlighten them so far as that is necessary, and direct them to such Means as are sufficient for their Instruction both Humane and Divine Truths; (*P. II*, p. 118)

Again, Astell introduced an autodidactic process of learning to her female readers, which in looking at Astell's life and at her immense stock of knowledge, it becomes clear she herself had undergone. The instructions she offered to her female contemporaries in the *Proposal* represent a summary of a programme she had followed herself and handed down as a theoretical manual to other women.

⁴⁸ Antoine Arnauld (1693), *Logic, or the Art of Thinking*, p. 38.

⁴⁹ Poullain de la Barre (1677), *The Woman as Good as the Man: Or Equality of Both Sexes. Written Originally in French And Translated into English by A.L.*, London: Printed by T.M. for N. Brooks, at the Angel in Cornhil.

4.3.3. “If GOD had not intended that Women shou’d use their Reason, He wou’d not have given them any” – The last attempt

The second *Proposal* was equally as successful as the first. Yet, the situation for women still had not changed. So, in 1705, Astell put pen to paper once again to voice her opinion publicly. This time, however, she chose a different starting point. It was the legitimacy of Anglican theology and its consequences which became the focus of her piece *The Christian Religion, As Professed by a Daughter of the Church of England* (1705).⁵⁰ Her approach was again to address her female contemporaries directly. To a further edition in 1730 the subtitle, *Containing Proper Directions for the due Behaviour of Women in every Station of Life*, was added to the book indicating its content. But she was also aiming for a general readership which could support her ideas. The work was dedicated to her high-aristocratic friend Catherine Jones, one of a group of Chelsea high-aristocratic Ladies who welcomed Astell's ideas which legitimated their often independent female lives. But Astell, as we shall later see, intended this call to go beyond this exclusive circle of women.

In *The Christian Religion* (CR) Astell argued right from the beginning for the centrality of religious devotion. Still, hers was an enlightened version of religious devotion in so far as she propagated the teachings of the Church of England as the right path not only for men but also for women. In an attempt to influence public opinion, Astell claimed that there was no difference between the religion of men and women: “For tho’ the Press has help’d us to the Religion of a *Physician*, a *Layman*, a *Gentleman*, and a *Lady*, yet in my poor opinion, they have all of them but one Religion if they are Christians” (CR, p. 2). As a consequence, the path to salvation was identical for men and women, hence, Astell argued, their spiritual development should also be the same. Devotion was for Astell not a process which could simply be followed. For her it was an active choice guided by rationality which ensured that the right form of Christianity was practiced in a correct way. In this logic women were for the benefit of society to be integrated in this form of practice to ensure their right belief as well. Astell saw it as her task to take over this educational process.

⁵⁰ Hilda Smith understands Astell's *Christian Religion* as a response to a current work *The Lady's religion* to which she doesn't give any reference. See Hilda Smith (1984), *Reason's Disciples*, p. 119.

Astell believed that rationality always carried the privilege of choice. As religion was in Astell's understanding to be driven by rational principles, it was no exception. It too should be the outcome of a process of volition. She offered her own faith as an example:

I am a Christian then, and a member of the Church of *England*, not because I was Born in *England*, and Educated by Conforming Parents, but because I have, according to the best of my Understanding (7), and with some application and industry, examin'd the Doctrine and Precepts of Christianity, the Reasons and Authority on which it is built. (*CR*, p. 6-7)

Astell here explicitly unveiled for her readership the process she herself had undergone to comprehend her belief. The result was that she followed the Church of England because she rationally understood and agreed to its doctrine. Astell reconstructed that process in full detail for her readers to identify with it.

The first question one must pose, Astell contends, is 'what am I', which leads to but one answer:

Nay, had I been shut up in a den from my Infancy, if Reason had ever budded, I must have thought *what am I? And from whence had I my Being?* If I had been admitted to converse among my Fellow-Creatures, the next thought must have been, certainly I do not owe my Being to those who are as weak, as precarious as I am; Mankind must have had a Beginning, and there must be a last resort to a Self-existing Being. And this Being which is so liberal in its communications, must needs possess in the utmost Perfection all that good which it bestows. (*CR*, p.8-9)

Astell presented her logic further for her readership in 'translating' the prerequisites of religious belief. She offered proof of God, which was very near to the one Descartes had given in his *Discourse*. In referring to Descartes' strategy of universal doubt she argued that individual existence can be questioned unlike that of God, as he is the most perfect being:

I can as soon question my own Being, as the Being of a God, for I am only because He is. And when I think of GOD, I can't possibly think Him to be any other than the most Perfect Being; a Being Infinite in all Perfections. ... For if GOD deriv'd His Being from any but Himself, there must be something Greater and more Perfect than GOD, which is absurd, since GOD is by the supposition the most Perfect Being, and consequently Self-existing. Because there can be no Absolute and Infinite Perfection but where there is Self-existence; for from whence shall it be derived? And Self-existence is such a Perfection as necessarily includes all other Perfections. That there is a Self-existing Being (9) is evident to the meanest Understanding, for without it there cou'd have been no Men, no World, no Being at all; since that which once *was not*, cou'd never make it self; Nor can any Being communicate that to another which it has not it self. Therefore the Self-existing Being must contain all other Perfections, therefore it must be an Intelligent Being, and therefore it must be GOD. Hence I conclude, *That God only is*, and that all Beings besides His, are only the mere Creatures of His Will. (CR, p. 7-8)

For Astell divine perfection consisted in "Wisdom and Goodness, Justice and Holiness" and through right religious devotion this perfection could form part of the individual:

So that when I examine my Idea, or rather according to the Apostles expression, my Perception of GOD, who *is not far from every one of us, for in Him we Live, Move, and have our Being*, as the very Heathens own'd; I find that the notion I have of GOD, contains those and all other Perfections. Among which Self-existence is most remarkable, as being the original and basis of all the rest. (CR, p. 8)

It was Descartes who developed this logic in writing that the individual's perception of a more perfect being and perfect perception of things indeed derived from a perfect being – from God. "So as it followed, that it must have bin put into me by Nature which was truly more perfect then I, and even which had in it all the perfections whereof I could have an Idea" (*Discourse* 1649, p. 55). Astell heavily relied on Descartes' ideas and appropriated them for her understanding of religious belief.

They supplied a philosophical matrix on which she called for women to practice religion through their rational faculties. With the proof of God she introduced this call from the other direction. She proved that there is no being more perfect than God, arguing that even if one were to grow up in a den, the individual instinctively knows that there is something more perfect than her/himself, which is God. After Astell set the principles for God's existence she continued to turn to his creation – the individual. God had made the individual rational and put the principles of truth into her/him. And this is exactly the point Astell wanted to focus on. If all individuals possess rationality and the right principles to be guided to truth, this competence must also be used as a guide for finding the right religious practice. Only after arguing for all these prerequisites does Astell go on to include women. To be in possession of rationality obliges the individual – men and women – to use and cultivate this faculty in order to practice religion correctly. She wrote:

If GOD had not intended that Women shou'd use their Reason, He wou'd not have given them any, for He does nothing in vain. If they are to use their Reason, certainly it ought to be employ'd about the noblest Objects, and in business of the greatest Consequence, therefore in Religion.

The right use of rationality therefore directly leads to God and a correct practice of religion. For Astell, then, one's moral state depended on the quality of one's rationality, and as the two are inevitably intermingled she sought to convince her readers that women needed to cultivate their *ratio* as well:

So that tho' Moral and Intellectual Improvements may be consider'd apart, they can't really be separated, at least not in a Christian sense. There is a natural connexion between Purity of Manners, and Soundness of Judgement; *if any man will do GOD's Will*, says the Lord, *he shall know of the Doctrine whether it be of GOD.* (CD, p. 290).

Here Astell's adaptation of Descartes clearly takes on an independent character. Astell saw truth as something divine. For her, God himself was truth. She wrote, "Reason is that light which GOD himself has set up in my mind to lead me to Him, I will therefore follow it so far as it can conduct me" (CR, p. 7). By understanding truth, God participates in the mind. In contrast, Descartes understood the subject moving

towards God in being allowed to share the knowledge of how he constructed the world. For Descartes the subject was empowered by God's will to look into the divine plan. This caused many hostile reactions as his thinking was perceived heretical as the individual was presented as participating in 'God's power'. Astell on the other hand fully remained in a conservative context with her specific understanding of truth as a participation of God which did not empower the knowing subject to the same extent as Descartes had done with his philosophy. She therefore explicitly made a difference between true knowledge and science: "True Knowledge, and not Science falsely so called, is a *Divine thing* ... For to Know is to perceive Truth, and the Perception of Truth is a Participation of GOD Himself who is *The Truth*, and the Participation of GOD is the Perfection of the Mind;" (CR, p. 294).

Astell's desire for transformation contained not only a moral but also a social dimension. She quite frankly voiced her opinion on social inequalities:

GOD is not Respector of Persons whatever we are; He made us all to be Happy, and never intended that some shou'd Riot in Luxury whilst others Starve with Want; that some shou'd be Sick even with Ease and Plenty, whilst others (243) are over-burden'd with Sorrow and Care. But having made us Rational and Free, he wou'd have us reduce this inequality, and supply the seeming defects that Providence has left for the exercise of our Vertue. (CR, p. 242-3)

The inequalities revealed here could be minimised, in Astell's understanding, if individuals would be guided by their rationality. As the quality of individual rationality was for Astell closely connected to the moral state of the person all social evil would be diminished. The demand to acknowledge rationality as the main instrument to challenge society for its best included women and presented them as a main factor of its success.

In her last work Astell became more consequent with her thought and her demands became more radical. If women were as rational as men and God led them in their intellectual activities as he did with their male contemporaries, women could be as competent as their male colleagues in fields they had as yet no access to. Astell even claimed that this untapped potential slowed down the process of progress. "And I make no question but great Improvements might be made in the Sciences, were not Women enviously excluded from this their proper Business" (CR, p. 297).

It is interesting to see how Astell's tone changed at the end of her career and her long struggle to achieve the acknowledgement of women's rationality. Since she had published her first *Proposal* she had tried out many different strategies to make her ideas publicly heard and to bring about a change for her female contemporaries and society as a whole. Throughout her writing career her tone became more assertive and her ideas developed a radical edge which almost fully challenged her conservative attitude. Although there were many inherent contradictions from the ideas she voiced for women to her conservative attitude, she nevertheless never abandoned it.

4.4. The impact of Astell's outline of *rational woman*

Though Astell's concept of rational woman was received ambiguously, it nevertheless influenced many – men and women - in multiple ways. Because of historical circumstances, it is easier to determine which gentleman read Astell's work, as some publicly commented on their reading or even employed some of her ideas in their own writing. Women, by contrast, read 'in their closets', and did not publish their experiences and inspirations, but rather circulated them among friends.

Some of Astell's male contemporaries were not only deeply inspired by the ideas expressed in her work but also made use of the concept of rational woman and the demand for female education in their own books. Daniel Defoe, for instance, argued for an educational institution for women in his *Essays on Projects* (1697). In the section *An Academy for Women* he employed arguments strongly influenced by Astell's *Proposal*.

I have often thought of it as one of the most barbarous Customs in the world, considering us as a Civiliz'd and a Christian Countrey, that we deny the advantages of Learning to Women. We reproach the Sex every day with Folly and Impertinence, while I am confident, had they the advantages of Education equal to us, they wou'd be guilty of less than our selves. (p. 282)

While Defoe paraphrased some of Astell's ideas here, he left out the strong religious orientation of her proposed seminary, offering instead the notion of public schooling for girls and women.⁵¹ In fact, Defoe openly referred to Astell's *Proposal* in an effort to differentiate his programme from hers:

When I talk therefore of an Academy for Women, I mean both the Model, the Teaching, and the Government, different from what is propos'd by that Ingenious Lady, for whose Proposal I have a very greet [sic!] Esteem, and also a great Opinion of her Wit; different too from all sorts of Religious Confinement, and above all, from *Vows of Celibacy*. Wherefore the Academy I propose should differ but little from Publick

⁵¹ See Robert H. Michel (1978), "English Attitudes towards Women, 1640-1700", in: *Canadian Journal of History*, vol. 13, Issue 1, pp. 35-60.

Schools, wherein such Ladies as were willing (287) to study, shou'd have all the advantages of Learning suitable to their Genius. (p. 286-287)

Defoe's open reference to Astell reflected the renown and acceptance of her work. Her ideas, in fact, also surface in literary works of the time. Samuel Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison* (1754),⁵² a character representative for bourgeois culture, who expounded a vision of a nunnery-like institution for the education of women, similar to Astell's. Ruth Perry moreover makes the argument for Richardson's *Clarissa* "that Astell was the model for his pious and articulate *Clarissa*, both because of her eloquence and wit and because of her ardent religiousness."⁵³

Not only Descartes' ideas were taken over without referencing their origin but also many of Astell's ideas were appropriated. Whole sections were taken out of her *Proposal* and copied into other works without mentioning their origin. Bishop Berkley plagiarised nearly one hundred pages of the *Proposal* almost verbatim into *The Ladies Library* (1714), which was published by Richard Steele without even mentioning the original source and its author in a footnote.⁵⁴ The text consists of two parts, one taken from the first *Proposal* the other from the second, though some essential changes had been carefully made changing its original content. As Richard H. Dammers points out in his essay on Steele's *Ladies Library*, "[t]he part of Astell's message that Steele could not accept, namely, a call for women's independence from men and a call for women to form a religious retirement community, was not included in *The Ladies Library*."⁵⁵ Rather than be provoked to anger, Astell dealt with this situation tongue-in-cheek. In the introduction of the second edition of her *Bart'lemy Fair* she wrote:

⁵² Samuel Richardson, *Sir Charles Grandison* (1754), third part.

⁵³ Ruth Perry (1986), *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, p. 100.

⁵⁴ See George Berkeley (1714), *The Ladies Library*, published by Richard Steele. Section: Ignorance, pp. 438-524.

⁵⁵ See Richard H. Dammers (1983), "Richard Steele and *The Ladies Library*", in: *Philological Quarterly*, vol. 63, no. 4, (Fall), p. 533.

[O]ur honest *Compiler* has made an honourable Amends to the Author, (I know not what he has to the Book-Seller) by transcribing above an hundred Pages in his *Ladies Library*, *verbatim*; except in a few Places, which if the Reader takes the Trouble to compare, perhaps he will not find improv'd. (*Bartl'emy Fair*, 1722, no pagination)

Here she gave reference to the quality of the plagiarized work which in her understanding had not improved from its original. And Astell further implied with her remark that it is her who is entitled to the money earned with this work - plagiarized from her successful writing.

Intrigued by the fact that a woman had written specifically for a female readership, many women read Astell's work. However, the sources of a potential female reading of her work are not as readily available as those of men. Although many women were able to read, only a limited number wrote and even fewer published the work of their pens. Judith Drake was one of the earliest of Astell's adherents. She was one of the first women to publish a work demanding acceptance for female rationality in her work *An Essay in Defence of the Female Sex* (1696), although anonymously.⁵⁶ Her argument centres around the question "whether the time an ingenious Gentleman spends in the Company of Women, may justly be said to be misemploy'd, or not" (p. 6). Drake dedicated her work to Princess Anne, just as Astell had done with her second *Proposal*. The existence of a female monarch was quite obviously seen as a legitimating force for those pro-women female authors.⁵⁷ Though unlike Astell Drake did not intend to instruct her female contemporaries, she used her predecessor's notion of rational woman to make a statement with provocatively political dimensions. She cleverly turned on its head the argument – made chiefly by men – that women were by nature not strong enough to participate in public offices:

⁵⁶ On the question of authenticity see the chapter on Judith Drake in: Moira Ferguson (ed.) (1985), *First Feminists. British Women Writers (1578-1799)*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 201.

⁵⁷ See Carol Barash (1992), "'The native Liberty ... of the Subject': Configurations of gender and authority in the works of Mary Chudleigh, Sarah Fyge Egerton, and Mary Astell", in: Isobel Grundy / Susan Wiseman (ed.), *Women, Writing, History*, London: B.T. Batsford, pp. 33-71.

I have yet another Argument from Nature, which is, that the very Make and Temper of our Bodies shew that we were never design'd for Fatigue; and the Vivacity of our Wits, and Readiness of our Invention (which are confess'd even by our Adversaries) demonstrate that we were chiefly intended for Thought and the Exercise of the Mind. Whereas on the contrary it is apparent from the strength and size of their Limbs, the Vigour and Hardiness of their Constitutions, that Men were purposely fram'd and contriv'd for Action, and Labour. (*An Essay in Defence of the Female Sex*, p. 18)

Meanwhile, Drake argued that the soul had no sex, implying equal rationality among individuals. Ruth Perry points out that Drake practiced medicine together with her brother, who had trained her, until one of her male patients, offended that his female doctor had dared to ask him for payment, accused her of malpractice.⁵⁸ Drake, then, was not only directly inspired by Astell's argument for the rationality of women but herself lived a life exemplifying it. *An Essay in Defence of the Female Sex* (1696) was very successful and went through four editions until 1721.

Susanna Centlivre (c.1670-1723), one of the most popular and successful playwrights of the eighteenth century,⁵⁹ was another woman who, at least in part, embodied Astell's thinking. Centlivre did not share Astell's political position but was an ardent Whig. From adolescence onwards she lived an independent life, eventually earning enough money with her popular plays to sustain herself. Her plays were of great success not only during her lifetime. Until the end of the nineteenth century two of her plays still belonged to the canon of non-Shakespearian comedies written before 1750, which were still regularly produced: *The Busybody* (1709) and *The Wonder: A Woman keeps a Secret* (1714). Some of Centlivre's female figures are demonstratively rational. In 1705 Centlivre took up the idea of a Protestant nunnery in her play *The Basset Table*.⁶⁰ One of the characters, Valeria, is a learned woman,

⁵⁸ See Ruth Perry (1986), *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, p. 490, footnote 25, original source is a letter from J. Drake to Sir Hans Sloane, by whom Drake was summoned in 1723 to defend herself, Additional MSS 4047:38, British Library, London.

⁵⁹ On Susanna Centlivre see Melinda C. Finberg (2001), *Eighteenth-Century Women Dramatists*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; I. Kendall (ed.) (1988), *Love and Thunder. Plays by Women in the Age of Queen Anne*, London: Methuen.

⁶⁰ See also Bridget Hill (1987), "A Refuge from Men: The Idea of a Protestant

while her cousin merely seeks distractive entertainment. In a fit of parody, the cousin mocks Valeria's thirst for reason, saying: "you should bestow your Fortune in founding a College for the Study of Philosophy, where none but Women should be admitted; and to immortalize your Name, they should be called *Valerians*, ha, ha, ha" (Act II).⁶¹

Centlivre did not see her position as playwright as an instructive one. In the preface and epilogue to her first play *The Prejur'd Husband* (1700), she argued against the Nonconformist clergyman, Jeremy Collier, and his work *Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* which was intended to reform the theatre. Against his opinion that theatre should always instruct and "recommend Virtue, and discountenance Vice;" (p. 1) Centlivre maintained that the theatre is a representation of society rather than a model for it.⁶² Her primary aim was to entertain her audience by using the stage as a reflection of society. In this context, the use of a female convent for her play *The Basset Table* can be read according to Centlivre's theory as a representation of current society, bearing witness to Astell's great impact. Furthermore, female playwrights often depended on the support of other women in competing with more accepted male writers in the play market. Over a third of the plays by female authors were dedicated to women who had ensured their success.⁶³ Centlivre addressed her female audience not only by dedicating her plays to them but also by including a pro-woman position like Astell's into her play.

It was further Mary Lee, Lady Chudleigh who was not only an adherent of Astell's arguments for the rationality of women but also a personal acquaintance of hers. Like Astell, Lady Chudleigh was a royalist, an Anglican and an autodidact. She knew Descartes' writing well and occasionally referred to his theory of vortexes. Angered by a sermon preached at a wedding in 1699 by the nonconformist minister John Sprint, in which he demanded the total subjection of women to their husbands,⁶⁴

Nunnery", in: *Past and Present*, November, no. 117, pp. 107-116, in this case p. 120.

⁶¹ Susanna Centlivre (1761), *The works of the Celebrated Mrs. Centlivre. In three volumes*, London: Printed for J. Knapton et al., first volume.

⁶² Jeremy Collier (1698), *Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*, London: Printed for S. Keble.

⁶³ Either in form of financial, social or emotional support. See I. Kendall's introduction to I. Kendall (ed.) (1988), *Love and Thunder*, p. 10.

⁶⁴ John Sprint (1699), *The Bride-Womans Counsellor, Being a Sermon Preach'd at a*

Lady Chudleigh wrote in response *The Ladies Defence: or, the Bride-Woman's Counsellor Answer'd*.⁶⁵ For Sprint a good wife “should be like a Mirrour which hath no Image of its own, but receives its Stamp and Image from the Face that looks into it: So should a good Wife endeavour to frame her outward Deportment, and her inward Affections according to her Husband's”. *The Ladies Defence* was a poem written in the form of a conversation between a parson, who reflected Sprint's attitudes, Melissa, whose voice can be identified with Chudleigh's, and Sir John Brute, Melissa's husband. It is known that Chudleigh's marriage was unhappy; whether the character of Brute can, however, be identified as her husband is unclear. His character also stands for the general male attitude towards women.

Chudleigh's intentions were to instruct her female readers against the attitudes of men like Sprint. In the introductory section of *The Ladies Defence*, “To all ingenious Ladies”, she cleverly turned to Sprint's sermon, feigning apology for the faults of women, then stating that the faults of women were a consequence of their position in society and against the rationality of women.

I am sorry Mr. Sprint should have any occasion given him for so severe an Invective, and I heartily wish my Sex wou'd keep a stricter Guard over their Passions, and amidst all the various Occurrences of Life, consult neither their Ease, the Gratification of their Humour, not the Satisfaction of others, when 'tis in Opposition to their Reason; (p. 214).⁶⁶

Chudleigh argues here not only for the rationality of women, but goes on to tell her female readership how to develop that potential, advising them to be “better pleas'd with the secret Plaudits of their own Consciences” than to turn to the “flattering acclamations” (p. 214) of a decadent world. Though she admits: “such an Evenness, such a Tranquility of Mind, is not attainable without much Study, and the closest Application of Thought; it must be the work of Time, and the Effect of a daily Practice” (p. 214). Chudleigh, focused her instructions to women less educated than herself,

Wedding, May the 11th, 1699, at Sherbourn, in Dorsetshire, London: H. Hills.

⁶⁵ It was published without her consent in the second edition of her *Poems* in 1700. See Moira Ferguson (ed.) (1985), *First Feminists. British Women Writers (1578-1799)*, part: Mary Lee, Lady Chudleigh, pp. 212-213.

⁶⁶ I quoted out of the extract of Chudleigh's *The Ladies Defence*, which is printed in: Moira Ferguson (ed.) (1985), *First Feminists*, p. 214.

explaining that she herself had been guided in her reason by women more knowing. She juxtaposes the lives of women who had actually made use of their rationality to Sprint and his adherents as an example for all female readers: “notwithstanding what has been said to the contrary by some envious Detractors, still among us Women that are shining Examples of Piety, Prudence, Moderation, Patience, and all other valuable Qualities; by such as these I should take it as a Favour to be instructed;” (p. 215). As no institutional education for girls and women existed, Chudleigh must have been referring to the few women who had enjoyed an education from childhood onwards, but also to those whose learning was autodidactic. She suggested an alternative concept of a female education based on the passing of knowledge from one women to another. Chudleigh perceived of herself and her writing as part of this process. In almost openly referring to Astell, she asked educated women to promulgate their know-how by instructing their female readers: “and would they [educated women] be a generous Condescension give themselves the Trouble of directing us in the management of our Lives, we should be for ever bound to pay’em the highest Ristributions.” (p. 215).

Chudleigh’s call for instructive support constitutes a cry for help which did not fall upon deaf ears in the case of Astell, but motivated her to write. Such a dynamic becomes increasingly visible when turning to Astell’s high-aristocratic friends,⁶⁷ for whom she was a kind of intellectual female model. Specifically close to her were women with a rather impressive pedigree: Lady Elisabeth Hastings, Lady Anne Countess of Coventry, Lady Catherine Jones and Elisabeth Hutcheson. Either not married or widowed (Lady Ann Coventry was a widow for 55 years!) those aristocratic Ladies were largely able to live their lives independently through the money and status they possessed.

⁶⁷ There were many aristocratic women who were closely acquainted with Astell. Elizabeth Thomas a contemporary, however, complained in a letter to Lady Chudleigh that Astell seemed to be overtly rank conscious in choosing her friends. See Ruth Perry (1986), *The Celebrated Mary Astell*. The women who were close to Astell were all of high-aristocratic status. Astell’s motives for those friendships can be speculated on. Was it simply that those Ladies were able to pursue an intellectual friendship or was their social power also of some relevance?

However, it was Astell's intellectual principles in combination with her rigorous religious beliefs that attracted her fellow women, specifically as she had transformed them into instruction manuals with her books. Those manuals were especially welcomed by Astell's aristocratic female friends as they legitimated their uncommon independent female lifestyles. In exchange, those aristocratic Ladies supported her materially – a necessary aid to keep up her intellectual activity. Lady Elisabeth Hastings for instance founded a girls-school with Astell for the daughters of the Chelsea veterans in 1709. She already maintained many charity schools, among those thirteen on the Isle of Man alone.⁶⁸ Out of Lady Elisabeth's bank documents it emerges that the money she gave to Astell was quite obviously not only intended to maintain the Chelsea school but also to cover Astell's living costs.⁶⁹ Lady Ann, Countess of Coventry, belonged to one of the riches families in England. It was she who networked Astell into the right circles where she was able to further promulgate her ideas. Her financial support was rather generous. When Elisabeth Elstob met Astell by coincidence in Chelsea and heard that her friend faced problems with her publisher being hesitant to publish her excellent anglo-saxon-grammar, she subscribed the book in the name of Lady Ann with a first payment and thereby helped to realize the project.⁷⁰

Lady Catherine Jones was probably the closest friend of Astell's. Like Astell, Jones had never married but was able to sustain herself through the money she had inherited from her father. In later years she convinced Astell to live with her and enjoy the privileges of an financially independent life.

The support of these Ladies helped Astell to realise her projects and sustain herself without carrying the stigma of alms. In fact, the arrangement was mutual insofar as an exchange took place between Astell and the legitimating character of her writing for rational women and the material support she received from women who desperately needed intellectual reinforcement.

⁶⁸ See Ruth Perry (1986), *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, p. 263.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ruth Perry (1986), *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, p. 268.

Astell's influence extended, as well, to women of a younger generation. One of her later female adherents was the young Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762), who had read Astell's *Proposal* when she was in her early teens.⁷¹ It made such an impression on her that she considered becoming a nun, apparently in Astell's convent-like institution as there were no convents left in England at that time. When reading Samuel Richardson's novel *Sir Charles Grandison* many years later, Montagu wrote to her daughter that she strongly disliked the moral tenor but was reminded of her own juvenile wishes by the adaptation of Astell's female monastery. Recollecting her memory she wrote to her daughter, Lady Bute:

It was a favourite Scheme of mine when I was fiveteen, and had I then been mistress of an Independent fortune, would certainly have executed it and elected my selfe Lady Abbess. There would you and your 10 children have been lost for ever.⁷²

Montagu pursued the idea of autodidactic female learning as Astell had promoted it in her writing. Already at the age of eleven she had committed herself to serious studies for the entire day, hiding from her governess to read Latin texts in the library of her father. As a young woman Lady Mary wrote to her friend, Ann Wortley: "I am trying whether it be possible to learn without a master."⁷³ Many years later she instructed her own daughter, Lady Bute, to treat her granddaughters in matters of education supportively:

If your Daughters are inclin'd to Love reading, do not check their Inclination by hindering them of the diverting part ... but teach them not to expect or desire any Applause from it. Let their Brothers shine, let them content themselves with makeing their lives easier by it.⁷⁴

In accordance with Astell's *Proposal*, she counselled Lady Bute to permit the girls access to their rationality, to allow her granddaughters a life as 'lay nuns'.

⁷¹ See also Ruth Perry and her essay on Mary Astell and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Ruth Perry (1981), "Two forgotten wits", in: *The Antioch review*, vol. 39, (Fall), pp. 431-438.

⁷² Montagu, Lady Mary Wortley (1965), *The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, edited by Robert Halsband, 3 vols., Oxford: Clarendon Press. Letter to Lady Bute, October 20, 1755, vol. 3, p. 97.

⁷³ Ibid., vol. 1, p. 6, letter dated August 8, 1709.

⁷⁴ Ibid., vol. 2, p. 449-50, letter dated January 1750.

Lady Mary shared Astell's opinions on the rationality of women and a consequent demand for female education. "I think it the highest Injustice to be debarr'd the Entertainment of my Closet and that the same Studies which raise the character of a Man should hurt that of a Woman. We are educated in the grossest ignorance, and no art omitted to stifle our natural reason."⁷⁵ She nevertheless was unable to follow the same principles as Astell. Concerned about the issue of social rank, she decided not to publish her thoughts – not even her travel experiences out of the period when her husband had been ambassador in Turkey from 1717-1718 – a journal written in the form of letters. Despite Astell's judgment that it was a fine piece of work, Montagu rejected to have her memoirs published as she felt it immodest for a woman to do so. The two friends agreed on a posthumous publication for which Montagu made the proper arrangements, and Astell wrote the preface for the future publication into the last pages of the back of Lady Mary's notebook.⁷⁶ In later years Montagu nevertheless released her writing to the public though not under her own name. In 1737 she briefly published a fortnightly paper called *The Nonsense of Common-Sense*, which stood in opposition to the paper of the day *Common Sense*. In the sixth number, Montagu, à la Astell, proclaimed herself a friend of the fair sex and "protector of all the oppressed"⁷⁷ and defended women's rationality.

There must have been many women who were influenced by Astell's continuous writing. Those mentioned above represent only the few whose rank gave their voices significance enough to make it into the historical record. Nevertheless, women of the lower ranks, as we have seen, were often able to read and the custom of book-lending meant that Astell's ideas were likely to have been promulgated among them as well. Unfortunately, the historical record does not reflect their participation.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ See Mary Astell's Preface to the Embassy Letters, app. 3 of Montagu, Lady Mary Wortley (1965), *The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, vol. 1, p. 467.

⁷⁷ Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1947), *The Nonsense of Common-Sense 1737-1738*, edited and with an introduction and notes by Robert Halsband, Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

4.5. A life-long struggle for female empowerment and its contradictions

Inspired early on by the ideas of Cartesianism, Mary Astell was able to lead a life substantially different from that of other women in her time. Her knowledge of Descartes' writing allowed her to adapt elements of his theories – especially his postulate that all individuals are rational – for herself and for her female contemporaries. Based on the assumptions of Cartesianism, she developed an empowering strategy which allowed her to position herself in rational equality to her male contemporaries. She theorised this process as instructions for other women. The primary audience for her work was women of aristocratic origin, as they were the only women able to fulfil her notion of sequestered learning, having the privilege to dispose of enough leisure time to contemplate and concentrate on their rationality. Yet, the popularity of her work exposed women of the lower ranks to her ideas as well.

Astell's claim that all women possessed equal rationality to their male contemporaries was of conflicting character. On the one hand, she argued that women and men, although physically different, shared the same rational capacities. The mind, for Astell, was sexless. Consequently, she demanded a female education acknowledging those facts. On the other hand, the premise of equal rationality did not lead her to demand female access to all positions of society. Her claims attempted to free women of their ignorance and introduce the only realm in which the rationality of women was essential – in the understanding of religion. A subversion of existing social structures, then, was not part of her programme, instead, she promoted an inward turn for women as a strategy of survival.⁷⁸ Unlike later liberal feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Astell did not argue that women were qualified through their rationality for all positions in society or that they should be given political rights.

⁷⁸ See also Regina Janes (1976), "Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary, Or, Mary Astell and Mary Wollstonecraft Compared", in: *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, vol. 5, edited by Ronald C. Rosbottom, *American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 121-139.

Yet, she questioned the basis for society's denial of women's rationality and dignity in their marriages through the concept of custom and tradition. Her critique of the contemporary social system, however, did not seek to break down social hierarchies, but to improve women's position within existing structures. The contradictions of her positions, though never resolved, set the stage for later claims in women's history. Astell was a pre-enlightenment thinker who had dared to claim for women what had only been claimed for men. The contradictions inherent in her demands found their continuation in the enlightenment period and its concept of equality.

5. Conclusion

I began this dissertation by posing the question: why undertake another study of Descartes' appeal for seventeenth-century women? It is my hope that the answer to this question has, in the meantime, become clear: feminist theoretical approaches to Descartes to date have failed to acknowledge the reception of Cartesian thought from the vantage point of seventeenth-century English women. Only if the historical context is accounted for and a historicizing perspective is assumed can the specific ways in which English women appropriated the ideas of Descartes on behalf of their sex be seen. As outlined in chapter 1, such an historical perspective takes into account changes in the rates of general and, specifically, women's literacy and places it in constellation with England's embrace of the printed word in a variety of media, to show the high accessibility and consequent dissemination of Descartes' ideas to the public - literate women and men, across social rank.

While the reluctance (of both men and women, as Margaret Ezell has argued¹) to commit their ideas to print in the form of publication makes the historical record of Cartesian voices somewhat scant, I have examined here two of the most widely-heard female voices of the period – those of Margaret Cavendish and Mary Astell – and claimed that many more women participated in public discussions on women's status based on Cartesian thought. The efforts of these women to ameliorate the social position of their sex were supported, moreover, by the general social upheaval of the period, which provided a climate for the transformation of traditional relations of hierarchy across the social spectrum.

The women examined here appropriated the ideas of Descartes as tools with which to challenge the accepted social order and extend female agency to access realms otherwise closed-off to female participation. These 'first feminists' were attracted by three Cartesian principles in particular: the notion of equal rationality, the rejection of an Aristotelian curriculum, and the principle of universal doubt.

¹ Publishing was not always attractive for seventeenth-century England: "Reluctance to commit one's words or name to print, therefore, cannot be seen as a peculiarly female trait, but a manifestation of a much more general, and much older, attitude about writing, printing, and readership." Margaret J. Ezell (1987), *The Patriarch's Wife. Literary Evidence and the History of the Family*, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press.

Empowered by these tools of reason they argued, first, not only that women were just as rational as men, but that they were, due to their endowment with the light of reason, equally able to access philosophical truth seen as inherent in women, like in men, as a God-given faculty. Descartes' rejection of traditional educational methods turned away from formal education to embrace a concept based on autodidactic principles. Many English women were quick to recognize and appropriated these principles to argue for the right to be educated as a woman. The strategy of universal doubt, furthermore, led these women to send a wake-up call, as a kind of an awareness-raising strategy, to their female contemporaries to use their God given reason to reject false 'truths' upheld by custom and tradition. Ultimately, and ironically, however, these liberating principles were subsumed within the overall goal of discovering God-given truth and allowed women to profit from Descartes' ideas without appearing to pose too great a threat to current social paradigms.

I have investigated the peculiarly English way of adopting Cartesian thought in terms of an intertextuality that makes the tracing of Cartesian ideas in the texts of seventeenth-century England rather challenging, especially in the case of women. Descartes' influence on the English was not as 'above board' as was the influence he exercised on his French contemporaries. The latter often took the form of discipleship, whereas the English subsumed Cartesian ideas in their thought and published work without directly acknowledging them as such. This can also be seen in the work of Cavendish and Astell. This kind of intertextuality bespeaks the popularity and acceptance of Descartes' ideas in seventeenth-century England and underscores the important role they played for the social advancement of women, which is due to their heavy impact on the social consciousness of the period. This general spirit of individual empowerment over against external authority trickled down, so to speak, to women's lives, and it empowered and legitimated their desire for education and self-advancement.

While feminist theory to date has almost demonised Descartes for promulgating the mind-body split, an historical analysis of the sort undertaken here offers a new perspective from which to re-evaluate the impact of Cartesian ideas on English women. Cornelia Klinger² has argued on behalf of the enlightenment that, though its

² Cornelia Klinger (1990), "Unzeitgemäßes Plädoyer für die Aufklärung", in: Barbara

potential was not fully realised, it enabled women to seriously challenge the notion that woman was merely a lesser version of man with that of a basic equality of the sexes. I have extended that argument to the work of Cavendish and Astell, who, despite their position as pre-enlightenment figures, are but a step away from such an egalitarian perspective. Klinger goes on to challenge critics of the enlightenment, who claim that women were not subsumed in its concept of equality, by offering that the notion of equality among men was a prerequisite for establishing women's equality in society at all. Klinger marks this as an achievement which must be acknowledged. In the spirit of Klinger's argument, I thus suggest that the same can be said of the pre-enlightenment figures discussed here. Descartes' notion of equal rational ability is a predecessor of arguments for general equality. Through the Cartesian influence, literate women were given the opportunity to contribute intellectually to a culture which had up to then rejected the idea of thinking women. So, despite the prevailing anti-feminist uses to which Cartesianism has been put throughout the ages, it could be claimed that at the outset of his reception, Descartes actually made English women think.

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7. Appendix I

Questions on Descartes or touching on Cartesianism of the *Athenian Gazette*, first Volume:

The Athenian Gazette. Or Casuistical Mercury, resolving all the most Nice and Curious Questions proposed by the Ingenious: The **First Volume (1691)**, Treating on the several Subjects mentioned in the contents at the Beginning of the Book

- Whether the soul is Eternal, or preexistent, from the Creation, or contemporary with its Embrio? Q.2 N1
- What idea a Man can have in his mind of the Spiritual World, which he never saw? Q9 N3
- What is the soul of man and whether eternal? Q1 N6
- Is the Soul subject to passion? Q9 N8
- What are the Souls of Brutes? Whether they have true Reason, and how they differ from that of Man? Q2 N9 (Tuesday, April 21, 1691)
- How Man shall know when he dreams, or is really awake? Q3 N9 (Tuesday, April 21, 1691)
- Whether the Soul is born with the body? Q3 N12 (Saturday, May 21, 1691)
- What is the Soul of Man, and whether Eternal? Q.1.N.6.
- Is the Soul subject to Passion? Q.9.N.8.
- A Sailor onboard the Floet, by an unlucky Accident broke his Leg, being in Drink, and refusing the assistance of the Surgeon of the Ship; called for a piece of new Tarpauling that lay on the Deck, which he rolled some turns round his Leg, trying up all close, with a few Hoop-Sticks, and was able immediately after to walk round the Ship, never keeping his Bed one day. I would know whether the Cure is to be attributed to the Emplastick Nature of the tarr'd and pitch'd Cloth bound on strait with the Hoop-stick, &c. or rather whether its may not be solved according to the Cartesian Philosophy? Q.4.N.16. (Saturday, May 16, 1691)
- Why is it supposed by some, that Women have no Souls? Q 7 N 18 (Saturday, May 23 1691)
- Whether it's true, that nothing's in the Intellect, but what was first in the Senses? Q.16.N.21.
- Whether the antient *Philosophers*, upon supposition of living good lives, can be reasonably thought to be damned? Q5 N26
- Whether a separate Soul can assume a Body; and how that which has no Body, can operate on what is so? Q.4.N.28.

Lebenslauf

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